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**Naturalist Themes and Techniques
in the Fiction of J.-K. Huysmans**

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in the University of Warwick
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DECLARATION

This thesis is based entirely on the individual research of the author. The section of chapter three dealing with A vau-l'eau has been published as 'A vau-l'eau: le monde indigeste du naturalisme', Bulletin de la Société J.-K. Huysmans, 71, 1980.

NOTE

Page references to works by J.-K. Huysmans given in the text of this thesis are cited from the relevant volume of the Oeuvres complètes (Paris, Crès, 1928-34), unless otherwise stated.

INTRODUCTION

In his interesting survey J.-K. Huysmans devant la critique en France: 1874-1960, published in 1970, Michael Issacharoff observed that

La critique huysmansienne se préoccupe beaucoup trop... des détails biographiques, en laissant souvent de côté tout essai d'analyse littéraire. (1)

Certainly the most useful book on Huysmans is Robert Baldick's biography, published in 1955 (2) two years after Pierre Cogny's substantial general study of Huysmans' thought and writings, J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité. However, within the last twenty-five years, considerable attempts have been made to redress the balance in favour of close analysis of Huysmans' texts, usually in the form of short articles devoted to specific works or topics. Three significant examples indicate this change of approach: the publication of the papers given at the Le Mans colloquium of 1977 in the Revue des sciences humaines (170-71, 1978), the Festschrift for Pierre Lambert, (3) or the increasing tendency of the Bulletin de la Société J.-K. Huysmans to print articles which adopt the technique of academic literary criticism rather than that of bio-bibliographical scholarship which was favoured in the past. In addition, all the best known works up to and including La-bas are now available in paperback -- and to the editions of A rebours presented by Marc Fumaroli and Pierre Waldner has recently been added Mme Rose Fortassier's excellent critical edition of Huysmans' masterpiece. (4)

Nevertheless it remains true to say that there is no published work exclusively devoted to the analysis of Huysmans as a novelist, which not only discusses individual novels but also

the general pattern of their development. The aim of this thesis is precisely to study the fiction of J.-K. Huysmans, from the perspective of his association with naturalism. Two unpublished doctoral dissertations submitted in British universities have previously surveyed Huysmans' fictional output. The first is by Robert Baldick, on 'The Novels of J.-K. Huysmans'. (5) Despite this title, however, only one of the four parts is actually directed towards examining 'The Novelist's Craft' -- the remaining three discussing his life, thought and influence. Significantly, the third volume of the thesis (one third of the total work) consists of an appendix of unpublished documents, which Baldick exploits to the full in the subsequent biography. In fact the dissertation is to all intents and purposes simply an initial draft of this biography, and Baldick makes his biographical bias clear from the beginning:

With the possible exception of Les Soeurs Vatar, Huysmans' novels are seen to comprise the memoirs of his material and spiritual existence, with a growing emphasis in each succeeding work upon the events of his inner life. (6)

The second thesis, by John Roach, is on 'The Themes and Techniques in the Pre-conversion Novels of J.-K. Huysmans'. (7) Roach does not study individual works in their own right, but adopts a thematic approach, excluding what he calls Huysmans' 'post-naturalist period' from consideration altogether. His main reason for this exclusion is not simply a justifiable attempt to counteract the 'Catholic' bias of previous commentators, (8) but also the somewhat questionable belief that after his conversion Huysmans underwent an equally radical transformation as a novelist. Thus Roach argues that there is a significant change in Huysmans' attitude towards time from En route onwards: if before it is seen

as a 'state of flux confirming man's servitude to temporality in his aleatory condition', now Durtal enters a 'Maintenant qui dure' of mystic unity with the Divine. (9) This assertion seems, frankly, quite unconvincing, for the biographical and literary facts suggest that, as Marie-Claire Bancquart puts it, 'la conversion de Huysmans n'était point apaisement'. (10) In any case, simply to ignore Huysmans' Catholic work is to offer a vision of the writer which in its own way is as blinkered and truncated as that of the Catholic critics who dismiss his early writings as mere pornography. (11) Furthermore, the thematic approach creates the problem that the novels themselves have inevitably to be subordinated to the themes they are said to exemplify. Individual works tend to be seen in a fragmentary way as their different elements are analysed in subsequent sections, and at the same time there is a certain repetitiveness as the same works recur in different contexts. Consequently, a chronological examination of the entirety of Huysmans' fictional output seems far more likely to allow an analysis which respects not only the autonomy of particular works, but also the coherence of his literary vision and his place in literary history.

A major problem in assessing Huysmans' vision and his situation in literary history is to define the exact nature of his relationship with naturalism. His contemporaries began to experience some difficulty in classifying him when, with A rebours, he had manifestly deserted 'La Queue de M. Zola'. (12) For Jules Euret, carrying out his Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire in 1891, Huysmans remains among the ranks of the 'naturalistes', whereas C. Le Goffic writing Les Romanciers d'aujourd'hui in 1890 had already transferred him to 'les symbolistes'. Huysmans

himself might well at this time have agreed with Octave Mirbeau's scornful dismissal of such journalistic labels, the latter telling Huret: 'Le naturalisme! mais je m'en fiche!' (13) Certainly Huret's description of Huysmans' co-author of Les Soirées de Médan, Léon Hennique, as passing through naturalism to being a 'quasi-symboliste', after starting as a 'romantique convaincu', (14) seems to suggest a rather glib conception of literary fashions. But though Huysmans promises his correspondent Arij Prins in April 1890 that in La-bas 'je vomis dans le premier chapitre sur le naturalisme', (15) the published novel in fact attempts a more serious appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of naturalism and of the possibility of reconciling it with the spiritual perspective to which the author was himself now turning.

Subsequent commentators have frequently turned their attention to the problem of Huysmans' betrayal or renewal of naturalism (as Zola and Huysmans himself might respectively have seen it) in A rebours and La-bas. Henri Bachelin's book, J.-K. Huysmans: du naturalisme littéraire au naturalisme mystique, published in 1926, offers a full and fair treatment of this subject, while remaining on a relatively generalised level. Whereas a study entitled Des ténèbres à la lumière: étapes de la pensée mystique de J.-K. Huysmans, published by the Jesuit M.M. Belval in 1968, seems from the outset prepared to relegate Huysmans' pre-conversion novels to the outer darkness, Bachelin at least allows for continuity and change simultaneously. As his title suggests, naturalism remains present while undergoing a qualitative transformation from the 'literary' to the 'mystical'. Mysticism may well seem an unsatisfactory term to associate either with the study of literary texts for their intrinsic interest,

or with a movement like naturalism which is generally thought to reflect a materialistic determinism. This is perhaps why critics of Huysmans tend to shy away from studying the practical implications of his conception of 'naturalisme spiritualiste' in his texts. There are notable exceptions, such as Marie-Louise Issaurat-Deslaef's examination of the fantastic elements in La-bas. (16) but too often commentators seem content to delineate the stages of Huysmans' literary conversion on a purely biographical level.

In point of fact, apart from contemporary reviews, there are few studies devoted to the literary elements of his post-conversion work. Richard Griffiths charted his place in the Catholic Revival in the Reactionary Revolution in 1966, but from the broad perspective of the history of religious ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While each year produces several articles on A rebours which draw attention to Huysmans' 'mise en question du Référent suprême, la Nature' (as Max Milner puts it) in his most famous work, there seems to be much less interest in the ways in which Huysmans subsequently strove to make literature out of his confrontation with the ultimate 'referent', God. Noting this absence, Milner wonders:

En Route marquerait-il le départ vers un ailleurs de la littérature, ou de ce que nos contemporains ressentent comme tel? (17)

A recent book by Madeleine Y. Ortoleva, Joris-Karl Huysmans romancier du salut (1981), seems to promise a fresh approach to Huysmans' final works. But although this commentator makes frequent use of the term 'les romans du salut' in her study, the reader is left to infer that the 'salvation' seems merely to lie in the fact that Huysmans continued to write novels

while practising as a Catholic and even wrote about Catholicism; we remain with the biographical bias. The tensions and contradictions behind Huysmans' supposed reconciliation of naturalism and religious faith are barely explored.

There is a need, then, to go beyond the general, largely historical, perspective which critics have adopted in discussing Huysmans' relationship to naturalism and look closely at its implications for his individual texts. By making use of the term 'naturalisme spiritualiste' in the first chapter of La-bas, Huysmans himself seems to invite us to see all his work in terms of one variety or another of naturalism, rather than simply those early works most obviously written under the influence of Zola. Although it is certainly necessary to respect the facts of his biography -- his return to Catholicism clearly creates a 'before' and 'after' -- there seems to be no valid reason to ignore or dismiss any particular period of his work, or give some particular period a privileged status, for what in the first instance at least must be grounds extrinsic to literary judgements. Perhaps, in the final analysis, Huysmans does break the bounds of naturalism, fiction or literature in the course of his development; but this is precisely the issue to be explored.

* * * * *

CHAPTER ONE

HUYSMANS AS A PROPONENT AND CRITIC OF NATURALISM

NATURALISME: Système de ceux qui attribuent tout à la nature comme premier principe.

(E. Littré, Dictionnaire de la langue française. 1869)

Darwin's children laughed at him for the naive enthusiasm of his descriptions, seizing particularly on his account of a larval cirripede 'with six pairs of beautifully constructed natatory legs, a pair of magnificent compound eyes, and extremely complex antennae', which they said sounded like an advertisement. Yet this enthusiasm, an almost childlike sense of wonder at the amazing contrivances and interrelations of the natural world, which never became desiccated even while he was engaged in giving them a purely material explanation, is one of the charms of The Origin and is a feature of it which is unduly neglected by the many who have found in it merely a brutally materialistic account of a bleak and soulless nature.

(J.W. Burrow, Introduction to The Origin of Species. Penguin 1968)

Flaubert's disdain for literary labels is well known.

Writing to Maupassant on 25 December 1876, he remarks:

Comment peut-on donner dans des mots vides de sens comme celui-là: 'Naturalisme'? Pourquoi a-t-on délaissé ce bon Champfleury avec le 'Réalisme', qui est une ineptie du même calibre ou plutôt la même ineptie? (1)

To which Zola, in an obituary essay on Flaubert, replies:

Les jours où il s'emportait contre les étiquettes, les mots en isme, je lui répondais qu'il faut pourtant des mots pour constater des faits; souvent même ces mots sont forgés et imposés par le public, qui a besoin de se reconnaître, au milieu du travail de son temps. (2)

Flaubert, he adds, tries somewhat wilfully to deny the existence of literary history, of continuity and influences between writers and groups of writers; he pretends horror at the notion that Madame Bovary may be seen as a model of 'realism', would gladly destroy the book for a line of Chateaubriand, and so on.

But a hundred years on, the history of naturalism has been scrupulously charted in countless books and articles. The association of J.-K. Huysmans with naturalism is well known, as is the pattern of his development from 'le naturalisme littéraire' to 'le naturalisme mystique', to use Bachelin's terms. (3) In November 1891 (a transitional year marked by the publication of Là-bas) Huysmans himself declares in a letter that he rejects the spirit of naturalism while retaining its methods. (4) This is indeed the conventional critical view of his development as a novelist. Naturalism has survived as a general term, about which there is a critical consensus: this opening chapter tries to establish what this consensus is, with particular reference to Huysmans' own critical and theoretical writings. The rest of the thesis then relates the working definition of naturalism arrived at in this chapter to the practice of naturalism in Huysmans' fiction. The

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relationship between theory and practice is reciprocal; each illuminates the other. But it seems most logical to begin on theoretical terms, with an overview of Huysmans' contribution to naturalism as a critic and his place in the history of naturalism as a literary movement, before examining specific novels. Nevertheless, it must be made clear that, throughout, Huysmans is the main focus of this study; it is not intended to provide a discussion of naturalism and the naturalist novel in general.

Apart from his novels, Huysmans is of course famous as an art critic -- the critic of modern art, according to Roger Marx in 1893. (5) The main aim of this chapter is, however, to arrive at a working definition of naturalism by examining Huysmans' views on this term and relating them to those of other writers on the subject (either his contemporaries, or modern critics). A working definition, as a starting point, is surely vital if we are to avoid the dangers which Flaubert's irritation with 'isms' points to: such terms easily degenerate into vague generalisations which ignore the particularity of individual authors. A precise definition is, inevitably perhaps, impossible: on the one hand, the word naturalism is grossly overcharged with meanings, designating, as Block says,

either a literary group or school, a literary movement or period, a way of looking at literature and life, a method for the creation of literary works, or a literary technique and style. (6)

(And this enumeration virtually ignores the philosophical aspects of naturalism.) On the other hand, the opponents of naturalism can reduce it to a convenient term of abuse, signifying 'une vraie fureur de montrer la nature et l'homme dans ce qu'ils ont de plus vulgaire et de honteux.' (7)

One feels a need to legitimate one's use of the term by working out a definition of it, a definition which, while avoiding the extremes of simplification or saturation just mentioned, helps encapsulate, as Mario Praz says, the 'tendencies, themes and mannerisms current in a writer's own day (which) provide an indispensable aid to the interpretation of his work.' (8)

This chapter is divided into two main parts: firstly, an assessment of Huysmans' ability to tackle the concepts and problems of naturalism in critical terms, and a comparison of his views with those of other commentators; and secondly, in conclusion, an outline of the key themes of naturalism, following this theoretical discussion, and preceding the examination of Huysmans' treatment of these themes in his early novels and stories in chapters two and three. Before looking at Huysmans' views, it is useful to provide a chronological introduction to his critical writing -- particularly as this chronology overlaps closely with the 'rise and fall' of naturalism as it is recounted by literary histories.

In the widest sense, naturalism's trajectory can doubtless be traced back to eighteenth-century materialism and forward to the twentieth century, (9) but its success as a literary movement in France was established in the first two decades of the Third Republic. (10) C.A. Burns limits the 'Naturalist period' to the years between 1876 and 1884, in fact -- from the serialisation of L'Assommoir to A rebours. (11) But before these dates one finds the rise of realism at the beginning of the Second Empire;

Germinie Lacerteux published in 1865; Zola's preface to the second edition of Thérèse Raquin in 1868. And after them, the 'Manifeste des cinq' denouncing Zola's La Terre in 1887; Huret's Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire in 1891, where a majority of the writers consulted affirm the 'death' of naturalism, with the notable exception of Paul Alexis; and in 1893, the concluding volume of the Rougon-Macquart, Le Docteur Pascal. Such dates have a certain arbitrariness: the naturalist 'school', for instance, generally has its existence marked out by the 'Dîner Trapp' on 16 April 1877 (when Zola, Flaubert, Edmond de Goncourt and the co-authors of Les Soirées de Médan had a meal together) (12) and by the publication of Les Soirées de Médan in 1880, though this school was largely founded by the press. (13) Nevertheless, one does find that a large number of minor naturalist works were published during the eighties -- such as those by Céard, Adam, Bonnetain, Hennique, Alexis or Fèvre-Desprez which will be considered in the next chapter -- (14) following the success of Zola with L'Assommoir (1877) or Nana (1880), or, for that matter, the appearance of Huysmans' first three novels (1876-81).

Huysmans' changing attitudes towards naturalism, or modernism and modern art generally, could perhaps be segmented into several divisions -- but the most obvious dividing line falls between L'Art moderne (1883) and A rebours (1884). In a letter to Zola following the publication of this novel, he remarks that it deliberately contradicts the modernist aesthetic of L'Art moderne: (15) while in his preface to an edition of A rebours published in 1903, he describes the years

1884 to 1891 as a sort of mysterious transitional period preceding his return to Catholicism. To enumerate the works which will form the basis of the discussion of Huysmans' aesthetic views, we have, before 1884, the essay on 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' (1877) (preceded by a book of prose poems and articles in reviews) and L'Art moderne; then a deliberate withdrawal from modernism in A rebours and the art criticism of Certains (1889); the attack on naturalism in La-bas (1891), followed, finally, by the espousal of a religious viewpoint in the preface to A rebours and Trois primitifs (1905).

Out of a literary career spanning some thirty-three years, only the first ten (1874-83) show a genuine support for modernism; and in fact Huysmans' avowed adherence to naturalism as a cause or movement (as opposed to a literary vision) occupies only a few years of these ten, as a reading of his correspondence (and especially the as yet unpublished letters to the Belgian writer Théo Hannon) (16) indicates. In his first letter to Hannon (thanking him for a review of Marthe), dated 16 December 1876, he declares:

Je suis un réaliste de l'école de Goncourt, de Zola, de Flaubert etc - nous sommes à Paris un petit groupe (...)
Au point de vue du style, nous dérivons tous, plus ou moins de Gautier -

Two months later (14 February 1877), he again remarks that he belongs to

toute la bande des jeunes qui voulons faire vivant et vrai à n'importe quel prix et qui voulons aussi d'une langue éclatante et colorée,

and that his group is now more in the limelight thanks to L'Assommoir. (17) On 27 February 1877 he is preparing an article on Zola for Camille Lemonnier's review L'Actualité --

a series of articles in fact, which Helen Trudgian calls 'le grand manifeste du mouvement naturaliste.' (18) On 21 March 1877, he hopes the publisher Charpentier will start a review on naturalism; on 24 April 1877 he claims that only Zola is a true ally, unlike Flaubert and Goncourt, and dismisses Le Drageoir aux épices as 'Juvenilia!' adding 'comme je ne remuerais plus aujourd'hui toute la défroque du moyen âge!' While working on Les Soeurs Vatar in 1877 and 1878, he expresses frequent fears of censorship or even prosecution -- well-founded perhaps, if one recalls the prosecution of several naturalist authors in the first two decades of the Third Republic, and the imprisonment of Richepin and Desprez, the second dying as a result. (19) On 2 September 1878 he expresses his disgust with the Republic:

Joli le peuple! - Il va en foule aux obsèques et à la messe de bout de l'an de M. Thiers qui l'a si implacablement tué et déporté - faut avouer qu'il est d'une bonne pâte et singulièrement oublieux!

Ça me donne envie d'écrire sur la politique des livres qui me feraient fourrer 6 mois en prison - Il est vrai qu'avec une dose moindre de cachot, les Soeurs Vatar pourraient bien, sous ce gouvernement libéral, me procurer l'occasion d'élire demeure à Pelago-

Even before the publication of Les Soirées de Médan in 1880, however, Huysmans begins to express reservations about naturalism. On 17 October 1878 he grumbles to Hannon:

le mot naturalisme commence à être mis à tant de sauces d'un romantisme furieux, que je déclare ne plus me ranger pour mon compte sous ce drapeau - Ce serait l'Intimisme plutôt, le mot que nous devrions arborer - Je vais faire rayer à ce sujet le sous-titre des Soeurs Vatar -

This sub-title was, presumably, 'roman naturaliste'. (The novel is nevertheless dedicated to Zola.) On 21 November 1878, a month later, he adds that he wants nothing to do with a Revue moderne et naturaliste being founded by Bourget,

Richepin and others. (20) Towards the end of 1880, it is true, the co-authors of Les Soirées de Médan themselves tried to start a similar review, La Comédie humaine ; but the project came to nothing, Huysmans and Maupassant disagreeing with the other four, according to a rather sour letter to Hannon of 14 December 1880. On 10 February 1881, Huysmans reveals too that he considers his third novel, En ménage, radically different from the naturalist pattern:

si différent, si bizarre, si intimiste, si loin de toutes les idées de Zola, que je ne sais vraiment si je ne vais pas faire un vrai four. C'est du naturalisme assez neuf, je crois...

His positive enthusiasm for naturalism, then, lasts for little more than two years -- from the publication of Marthe in 1876 to the completion of Les Soeurs Vatar in 1878; its peak is the essay on Zola in 1877. After En ménage and A vau-l'eau (1882), he works sporadically on two more naturalist novels: La Faim, an account of the Siege and Commune begun in 1876 or earlier, (21) and a study of the Paris working-class quarter Le Gros-Caillou. (22) But this second work is abandoned for A rebours, (23) and neither is ever completed. By 22 November 1884, he writes to Jules Destrée:

je suis naturaliste, c'est-à-dire travaillant sur documents et écrivant le moins mal que je puis - je diffère peut-être des autres écrivains compris sous la même épithète, qui ne veut pas dire au fond grand chose, en ce que je n'aime guère le temps que je vis et que j'ai ça et là des échappées vers des 'aux-delà.' (24)

From 1888 onwards, he expresses outright contempt for his fellow authors of Les Soirées de Médan and especially Zola. (25) Increasingly, in fact, the naturalist novel is seen as futile. Around November 1891, after the publication of Là-bas, L'Éducation sentimentale is 'le vrai, le seul, livre naturaliste

au sens exact du mot,' and he asks:

Refaire En ménage? A quoi bon? - Est-ce que l'Éducation sentimentale n'est pas d'ailleurs supérieure de cent coudées à ce livre, par conséquent, inutile! (26)

Finally, after his conversion in 1892, not merely the novel, but all art is seen as pointless:

J'ai vécu pour l'art - et - aujourd'hui que j'ai 45 ans, j'aperçois son néant, et la parfaite vanité de ce qu'on nomme la notoriété. Ce sont des viandes creuses et dupantes, nulles. (27)

Huysmans' allegiance to the cause of naturalism as a public or publicised movement was then shortlived; for him the epithet 'naturaliste' 'ne veut pas dire au fond grand chose'. But if, as this study will argue, naturalism as a mode of writing is a vital concept for the understanding of all his fictional work, is it possible to derive a theoretical framework for approaching naturalism in this aesthetic sense from Huysmans' own critical writings? The works which precede the essay 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' do in fact already reveal certain significant aesthetic intentions.

In March 1886, he wrote to Prins that his genesis as a writer was stimulated by painting:

j'ai appris à me connaître comme littérateur, au Louvre, devant les tableaux de l'école hollandaise. Il me semblait qu'il fallait faire cela à la plume. (28)

In the early prose poem 'Un campement de bohémiens' (published in the Musée des deux mondes, 15 July 1875), (29) Huysmans does indeed present the narrator as a youthful enthusiast seeking images which recall Rembrandt. In 'Les Natures mortes' (La République des lettres, 20 May 1876), Rembrandt is celebrated for his use of this genre, which would be better named 'Nature vivante':

Il branche un jour un boeuf par les pattes, l'éventre et l'on dirait de ces cascades d'entrailles rouges des floraisons d'escarboucles, des grappes de rubis et de grenats serties dans de l'or pâle! Quel peintre idolâtre de la splendide horreur des boucheries, quel peintre, eût-il voué sa vie à l'étude des viandes saignant sur l'étal, eût ainsi trempé de pourpre le ventre béant d'un boeuf?

Rembrandt's 'boeuf écorché' had in fact already been re-created in Le Drageoir aux épices (1874), in the butcher's stall in 'Claudine'. One of the most striking qualities of these prose poems is their verbal impressionism, the attempt to use language as a sort of sensuous, tactile medium, capturing the play of light on the scales of 'Le Hareng saur', evoking innumerable variations on shades of red in 'Camaieu rouge'. But at the same time this awareness and rendering of the textures of the physical world is related to an experience of horror ('la splendide horreur des boucheries'), horror turned into an aesthetic spectacle, whose macabre appeal depends in large part on the discrepancy between the virtuosity of the rendering and the repulsiveness of what is rendered:

le cadavre d'un grand boeuf étalait, sous la lumière
crue du gaz, le monstrueux écrin de ses viscères (...)
Le boucher semblait émerveillé par ce spectacle...

(Le Drageoir aux épices, p.36)

Or, alternatively, horror is turned into allegory: in 'Ballade chlorotique', we see the apparition of disease, 'phtisie', as a woman. Or again, it may be used for a rather puerile piece of 'anti-idealist' debunking: in 'L'Extase', the ecstatic lover is brought down from the clouds when he realises his mistress has gone off to urinate in the bushes -- and behind the author's mockery of the lover, one senses a discomforted fascination with the 'vulgaires besoins' which so shock him. (30)

From his earliest works, then, one finds in Huysmans two important components of his naturalism: a desire to transcribe nature, the outer world, in minute, sensual detail, or rather, to transpose some of the effects of painting into literature (Huysmans 'imitating' nature reflected through others' art); and at the same time, a sense of unease or disgust with the physical, organic world. Both these characteristics can be found in other authors -- notably the Goncourts and Zola.

Jules Lemaitre remarks of Zola, for instance:

il semble qu'il ait maintenant la haine et la terreur de toute cette chair dont il est obsédé. (31)

And Lemaitre also attributes the Goncourts' creation of an 'écriture artiste' to the enterprise of painting with words -- 'une lutte du dictionnaire contre la palette' -- an endeavour which he considers by definition impossible. (32) Some of the effects of Le Drageoir aux épices are distinctly similar to descriptive passages of Zola's Le Ventre de Paris (1873). One might compare 'Le Hareng saur' to a description of sunlight playing on fish scales in chapter three, (33) or the ox in 'Claudine' with the 'horreur exquise' which Claude feels on beholding the 'grands mous' (lights) in chapter four. (34) Zola's insistence on 'la triperie' and 'la charcuterie' throughout the novel achieves a sort of obscene virtuosity: dead matter, offal, animals' intestines, is recycled, restored to life as an aesthetic spectacle. (35)

Turning to the essay on Zola, where Huysmans appears as a critic, one wonders how far he is able to bring out and illuminate such tendencies in the naturalist works which he discusses. 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' appeared in four

instalments in L'Actualité (Brussels, 11, 18, 25 March and 1 April 1877), and is cast very much as a polemical piece defending Zola against his detractors. The first part, for example, attacks the romantic legend of the artist as a sort of debauched vagabond as propagated by Henri Murger, showing Zola as a respectable bourgeois working regular hours:

Le buveur de sang, le pornographe, est tout simplement le plus exquis des hommes et le plus bienveillant des maîtres. (p.158)

The modern reader may find both the accusation and the defence equally ludicrous and unnecessary; but this exaggeration is itself significant. It does require a certain imagination for the present-day reader, inured to the flouting of every taboo in novel and film, to appreciate the polemical atmosphere in which naturalist works appeared. According to H. Block:

It is difficult for readers today to understand the almost pathological reactions of anger and disgust aroused by naturalistic novels at the end of the last century. (...) The naturalists provided not so much a new subject matter as a new emphasis on areas of experience which had been ignored if not repudiated by most earlier novelists. (36)

A work such as La Flore pornographique (1883) by one 'Ambroise Macrobe' provides one example in France of this hostility to naturalism. The account given by G. King of the translation and bowdlerisation of Zola's works in England (and the subsequent imprisonment of his unfortunate publisher and translator) is even more indicative. (37) The naturalist work clearly appears to be aesthetically, morally, and socially subversive in the eyes of the establishment: by claiming Zola as an upright member of the bourgeoisie, Huysmans is evidently trying to restore naturalism to political respectability and safety. And yet there is a contradiction in this polemical tone: Huysmans wishes to confound

his adversaries by claiming simultaneously that naturalism is merely literature, springing from hard work and not depravity, but also that it is a positive, innovatory force, overturning established conventions -- and therefore it must in a sense be potentially menacing.

Huysmans' tone is, as it were, both aggressive and defensive. In addition to this belligerence, he is using a language which is not entirely his own. Part two of 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir', on 'l'école naturaliste', adopts a collective 'we' from time to time; here, and in parts three and four (which discuss all Zola's novels and then L'Assommoir), he echoes Zola's language, quoting him directly or indirectly. Huysmans in fact takes on the role of the youthful champion of naturalism, paying obeisance to Zola and, one feels, pleading a cause which some of the uncertainties of his essay seem to suggest is not fully realised as his own. His definition of 'le réalisme ou le naturalisme' (p.160) -- for the terms are apparently interchangeable -- thus deliberately cites Zola:

le naturalisme, c'est, suivant l'expression même de M. Zola, l'étude patiente de la réalité, l'ensemble obtenu par l'observation des détails. (p.166)

Naturalism follows 'ce but suprême de l'artiste: la vérité, la vie!' (p.191) This goal seems so wide as to be virtually meaningless: as Robbe-Grillet has remarked, few writers would deny they were presenting some version of the 'truth'. (38) Huysmans seems to be unthinkingly presenting the naturalist novel as the transcription of 'un prétendu morceau de réalité,' a notion which Robbe-Grillet claims is typical of nineteenth-century fiction and no longer acceptable for the modern novel. (39)

Huysmans' definition of his art in the French edition of Marthe, two years later (1879), is again unsatisfyingly simple or simplistic:

Je fais ce que je vois, ce que je sens et ce que j'ai vécu, en l'écrivant du mieux que je puis, et voilà tout. (Marthe, p.9)

The categorical 'et voilà tout' contrasts oddly with a statement which seems banally uncontroversial. At best one can argue that by emphasising sight, feeling and lived experience as opposed to mind or the ideal, Huysmans indicates the importance of the physical world of the senses for naturalism -- but it is the reader who becomes the critic of Huysmans' text in this case, making a point the author seems unaware of.

Huysmans in fact appears uninterested in probing the notion of realism; it is simply a banner for him. But contrary to what Robbe-Grillet implies, this is not an inevitable result of being a 'realist'. One can discover a willingness to explore the gap between art and life and the realist conventions which pretend to cover this gap in a nineteenth-century author -- in Maupassant's preface to Pierre et Jean (1888), for example, where a distinction is convincingly made between absolute 'truth' and fictional 'vraisemblance', ironically anticipating the views of modern critics who often accuse realist authors of denying this very distinction. (40) Perhaps, as already suggested, Huysmans is striving to be uncontroversial and consequently is prepared to be superficial: if reality is simply 'there', to be 'patiently studied', the observer becomes innocent of any involvement in what he studies, however offensive it may be. Turning to Les Rougon-Macquart in his essay, Huysmans says:

Il va sans dire que je ne m'occuperai ici ni de la théorie scientifique développée par l'auteur, ni des questions politiques que d'aucuns ont cru devoir soulever à propos de ses livres. Tout cela m'importe, en vérité, fort peu. Je ne traiterai, dans ces courtes pages, que l'oeuvre d'art proprement dite. (p.168)

In other words, ingenuously or disingenuously, Huysmans considers that one can separate the 'ideological' from the purely aesthetic. The language of science or politics has nothing to do with art, which again thus escapes the charge of subversiveness.

Here, it is true, Huysmans is deliberately separating himself from Zola -- and it is particularly in this respect that commentators like Baldick see his work as being closer to the Goncourts' than Zola's in its apparent refusal of any 'political', humanitarian commitment. (41) The fashion for deriding Zola's universalising attempts to associate art, science and politics (typified by the famous slogan 'la République sera naturaliste ou elle ne sera pas') has passed. (42) In his introduction to the Garnier-Flammarion edition of Le Roman expérimental (first published as a book in 1880), A. Guedj argues that Zola adopts, albeit naively, the terminology of science because science was to the nineteenth century as linguistics or semiology might be to the twentieth -- the model of a correct approach to other branches of knowledge. Zola tries to establish a 'vraisemblable scientifique' -- a given basis of scientific knowledge on to which the novelist grafts his own intuition, thus reconciling the known facts of reality with his personal invention. In this sense the analogy between scientist and artist is not absurd: both are aiming at knowledge of man, according to Zola, (43) both serve a humanitarian purpose. (44) In 'Lettre à la jeunesse', Zola sees the writer as an investigator of 'les causes du mal social', his hope being to eradicate it. (45) In 'De la critique', he argues that the writer is inevitably caught up in the social process:

Les oeuvres écrites sont des expressions sociales, pas davantage. La Grèce héroïque écrit des épopées, la France du dix-neuvième siècle écrit des romans... (46)

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Guedj's conclusion, that the debate around naturalism was never simply literary, but political, concerning the place of man seen in the terms of science and positivism, thus seems quite justified. (47) By rejecting this conception of naturalism in 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir', Huysmans is not simply demonstrating the retreat into aestheticism later to be exemplified by A rebours, but making his whole essay verge on contradiction. By virtue of its existence as a sort of manifesto, for instance, it is already a 'political' statement, engaged in a debate which in its most extreme form could bring the repressive force of the state down on the writer. Thanking Huysmans for his work, Zola certainly takes it in this way:

Vous avez forcé l'éloge, et je n'accepte votre enthousiasme que pour la stupeur qu'il a dû produire chez certaines gens. Puis, n'est-ce pas? c'est un drapeau que vous levez. Entre nous, nous nous dirons nos vérités; mais devant le monde, nous serons très insolents. (48)

But in addition one finds internal contradictions in 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' which spring from an uncertainty about the ideology of naturalism.

First of all, Huysmans attempts to suggest that naturalism's approach is one of uncommitted objectivity:

nos romans ne soutiennent aucune thèse et, la plupart du temps, ne concluent pas. (p.163)

He then appears to reject questions of sexual morality:

l'art n'a rien à faire, je le dis haut et ferme, avec la pudeur et l'impudeur. Un roman qui est ordurier est un roman mal fait, et voilà tout. (p.165)

This last quotation reads ironically if one recalls Huysmans' description of his own novel Les Soeurs Vatar as 'ordurier' in 1885 (49) or his discussion of eroticism in Certains (1889). But even as it stands, the argument is contradictory. If,

as the first sentence says, art is removed from notions of decency, how can a novel ever be called 'ordurier'? On the other hand, if we paraphrase the second sentence, we see that obscenity is made a matter of literary incompetence -- and thus notions of decency must surely play a vital part in assessing a work. Huysmans' intention is presumably to subordinate moral judgements to aesthetic criteria rather than to exclude morality altogether, but this is not what he actually says. (50)

In any case, a few lines on, Huysmans seems to withdraw from this position of aesthetic defiance:

J'ajouterais encore aux réflexions qui précèdent qu'il est difficile, en faisant une oeuvre vivante et vraie, de ne pas la faire morale. (pp.165-66)

Morality becomes a question, not of artistic form, but of presenting the 'truth'. This is because, later in the essay, in his defence of L'Assommoir, Huysmans intends to quote (in a slightly abbreviated form) Zola's own preface to the novel, where a similar point is made:

J'ai voulu peindre la déchéance fatale d'une famille ouvrière, dans le milieu empesté de nos faubourgs, mon livre est de la morale en action simplement. (p.180)

The concluding 'simplement' in fact covers an issue which is highly complicated. Is Zola's moral intention directed towards social action (repressing alcoholism, slums, etc.) or is the picture of social misery itself morally effective? F.W.J. Hemmings has suggested that simply to portray the life of the urban proletariat represented the breaking of a taboo, a political as well as a literary gesture. (51) But as far as Huysmans is concerned, one sees that as a critic of naturalism he makes little attempt to bring out such implications, echoing Zola in a rather hollow fashion.

Huysmans' remarks on naturalist psychology seem to be
a deliberate imitation of Zola:

Étant donné, comme sujets à étudier, un homme et une femme, nous voulons les faire agir, dans un milieu observé et rendu avec un soin minutieux de détails, nous voulons démonter, si faire se peut, le mécanisme de leurs vertus et de leurs vices, disséquer l'amour, l'indifférence, ou la haine qui résulteront du frottement passager ou continu de ces deux êtres; nous sommes les montreurs, tristes ou gais, des bêtes! (pp.162-63)

The last clause, with its gleeful exclamation, defiantly proclaims the naturalists' portrayal of the human zoo.

The whole passage recalls the preface to Thérèse Raquin (1868):

En un mot, je n'ai eu qu'un désir: étant donné un homme puissant et une femme inassouvie, chercher en eux la bête, les jeter dans un drame violent, et noter scrupuleusement les sensations et les actes de ces êtres. J'ai simplement fait sur deux corps vivants le travail analytique que les chirurgiens font sur des cadavres. (52)

But while Zola uses this preface to propound a deliberately physiological view of 'naturalist man' -- remorse, for instance

consiste en un simple désordre organique, en une rébellion du système nerveux tendu à se rompre (53)

-- Huysmans, in his essay, claims he rejects such pseudo-scientific theorising. Yet here he takes up Zola's terminology with all its 'scientific' implications: the novelist exposes the 'mechanism' which determines behaviour, 'dissects' emotion, and treats his characters as subjects somehow 'given' outside himself. But whereas Zola casts himself as an earnest surgeon, Huysmans appears as a sort of showman displaying his beasts. (54)

'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' is then a propaganda piece, where Huysmans uses Zola's language without really accepting the determinist philosophy or sociological implications behind this language. (55) His desire to withdraw from naturalism as a social or public debate eighteen months after this essay

appeared is thus understandable. But in dismissing this ideology of naturalism, Huysmans ignores, or tries to ignore, one of its key aspects, the socio-political implications which take it beyond literature into the world. M. Raimond argues, for instance, that for the naturalists 'le roman était devenu une vaste enquête sur la nature et sur l'homme', (56) while Deffoux and Zavie write:

Ces écrivains ont catalogué, de la fin du Second Empire aux vingt premières années de la République, toutes les classes d'une société en pleine transformation. Ils se sont efforcés d'établir le dossier vivant de leur temps. (57)

But if Huysmans is unaware of this socio-historical perspective, one does at least find in his essay the fascination with writing as a form of plastic description already seen in the early prose poems. In this respect, his praise of Zola's novel Le Ventre de Paris seems entirely genuine:

Dans ce volume, le noyau est à peine visible, mais la chair, la pulpe, ont une saveur inconnue jusqu'alors; la peau a revêtu une richesse de tons qui semble dérobée à l'éblouissante palette des grands maîtres flamands. (p.177)

His dismissal of Stendhal ('Je ne parle pas ici de la sécheresse et de la pauvreté vraiment infamantes de son style...' p.159) is significant not only as an example of the deliberate and obstinate injustice of some of his critical judgements, but also because it indicates that for Huysmans style is not a means to an end but, as it were, a rich substance to be laid on with a palette knife. Bersani argues that Stendhal's elliptic manner, his impatience with style, spring from an awareness of and subtle reference to a world beyond language. (58) Huysmans, on the other hand, even in this early essay, prefers to leave the issues of the world to Zola and retreat into craftsmanship and aestheticism.

In view of his preference for matters of form and colour over the ideas which engage the work of art in the social process,

it is hardly surprising that Huysmans' best critical writing should be art criticism. His most substantial defence of modernism in all the arts is L'Art moderne (1883), a collection of his articles on the official Salons and the Independants' exhibitions between 1879 and 1882. These are the dates, of course, during which his own work practises the aesthetic defined in L'Art moderne (Les Soeurs Vatard. 1879; Croquis parisiens. 1880; En ménage. 1881), as the next chapter will show. Huysmans' epigraph to L'Art moderne suggests a polemical approach similar to that of 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir': 'Contrairement à l'opinion reçue, j'estime que toute vérité est bonne à dire.' He is on the side of the innovators, the naturalists in literature and the impressionists in art, and begins by asserting sweepingly that:

le naturalisme a essayé de jeter bas toutes les vieilles conventions et toutes les vieilles formules. (p.10)

As for most of the paintings in the official Salons, they are less interesting than the posters 'sur les rambuteaux des boulevards.' (p.14) Abuse of his adversaries and rejection of outmoded convention thus set the tone of the work.

Huysmans' own aesthetic criteria are sincerity, truth and nature. Awareness of reality is set against the blinkered archaism of studio painters:

Étant donné que pour les peintres mythologistes la nature et la vérité n'existent pas... (p.25)

In his satire of such painters, Huysmans frequently uses the same metaphorical process to suggest the lifelessness of their paintings: the living or natural is reduced to the man-made or artificial. Thus he derides 'un paysage de papier peint et un

ruisseau de verre filé' (p.24) or exclaims 'quels ciels métalliques!
une vraie ferblanterie de firmament.' (p.33) Such objects have
no inner substance:

ce n'est pas du sang qui devrait sortir de cette poupée
blême, c'est du son, du joli son jaune! (p.174)
le suède des gants a été soufflé, mais ne renferme
aucune chair. (p.175) (59)

Life or nature is then the supreme arbiter or referent ('Quelle
vérité! quelle vie!' there is in Degas, p.132). One could hardly be
farther, it seems, from A rebours published only a year later,
where artifice and the unnatural are raised to a philosophical,
aesthetic system. In L'Art moderne, the outer world of nature
is both a source of material -- the stock of modern life has
barely been tapped (pp.140-41) -- and also the yardstick against
which the treatment of this material can be judged. In other
words, the rather naive notion of realism as a sort of direct
transcription expressed in 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' seems to
reappear in L'Art moderne. Thus Huysmans tells us that Manet
'peint, en abrégant, la nature telle qu'elle est et telle qu'il
la voit.' (p.46) He praises a work by Bartholomé because 'C'est
pris sur le vif, c'est de l'art naturaliste et plein.' (p.71)
The artist should not re-create life but, so to speak, capture
it as it is lived, in all its substance, going beyond outward
appearances:

Qui a fait voir, dans une femme déshabillée, la
nationalité et l'époque auxquelles elle appartient,
la condition qu'elle occupe, l'âge, l'état intact
ou défloré de son corps? (pp.262-63) (60)

Traditionalist painters, on the contrary, refuse to recognise
such realities, disguising their models as classical figures
or faking their lighting. The true artist must

voir l'esprit des choses, qui est énorme et découle de
toute la nature comme l'eau coule des fontaines... (p.42)

But although L'Art moderne examines the ways all artists, traditionalist or modernist, writers or painters, somehow convert life into art, Huysmans' exploration of the transition from life to art, or from literature to painting, usually remains superficial. Is, for example, 'l'esprit des choses' a sort of pantheistic force inherent in the objects of the world, recaptured by the artist, or is it rather the essence of his personal vision given concrete form in his work? Huysmans' enthusiasm for 'les merveilleux spectacles des salons et de la rue' (p.15) is close to that of Baudelaire in Curiosités esthétiques for the sublime and epic aspects of modern life, when for example the poet writes:

La vie parisienne est féconde en sujets poétiques et merveilleux. Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l'atmosphère; mais nous ne le voyons pas. (61)

Baudelaire however states more clearly than Huysmans that this aesthetic appeal is not really latent in the world but created by the heightened sensibility of the artist, for whom the visible world is a stock of images and signs given value by his imagination: 'c'est une espèce de pâture que l'imagination doit digérer et transformer.' (62) The doctrine of copying nature is the 'enemy of art', (63) for the great artist is an 'imaginatif', painting not what he sees but what he 'dreams', (64) and his creation is a revelation of the spirit, of 'le surnaturalisme'. (65) The artist's creation is really superior to life, for he seems evidently to be related to the description of the flâneur (in 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne'), who is

un moi insatiable du non-moi. qui, à chaque instant, le rend et l'exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instable et fugitive. (66)

While Huysmans simply emphasises meticulous observation,

Baudelaire gives modern art an idealised function superior to the material world. It is not until Certains and La-bas that Huysmans himself begins to reject positivism (which Baudelaire denigrates in the 'Salon de 1859') and adopts his own version of 'surnaturalisme'. (67)

Just as Huysmans' statements on the aesthetic potential of the modern world are not altogether clearly developed, so too his views on the values of particular subjects tend to be rather confused. He attempts to adopt a relativist position concerning the artist's subject matter, rejecting the traditionalist hierarchy:

il n'y a pas plus de grande qu'il n'y a de moyenne et de petite nature (...) Il n'y a pas de sites plus nobles les uns que les autres... (p.118)

Thus it might seem that his approach is essentially 'formalist': the most important quality of a work would be its rendering, not what it describes -- and a little later in L'Art moderne he does say 'les sujets ne sont rien par eux-mêmes. Tout dépend de la façon dont ils sont traités...' (p.196) But he immediately adds a defensive parenthesis that virtually contradicts his first rejection of a hierarchy of subjects: '...et il n'en est point d'ailleurs de si licencieux et de si sordides qui ne se purifient au feu de l'art.' (p.196) (68) There is then a hierarchy of subjects, ranging from the noble to the sordid: but Huysmans somewhat tendentiously tries to justify his preference for the sordid, first of all by denying that it exists, but then by admitting its existence and making it subordinate to the 'alchemical' purification of art.

In fact it becomes apparent that Huysmans makes as

many value judgements about which subjects are appropriate for the artist as any academic painter or 'idealist' novelist. This is well demonstrated by his comments on urban landscapes in I.'Art moderne. Where the traditionalist portrays the healthy, sunlit aspects of nature, Huysmans prefers it in a diseased and depressed form, describing for instance various specimens of 'les deux pôles contraires du paysage parisien'. (pp.118-19) Yet here he seems again to be contradicting his own critical dogmas -- for when he implies that nature can be observed through a whole gamut of attitudes, of which he describes the two 'opposing poles', surely he is re-establishing by this judgement the very distinction between a 'grande' and a 'petite nature' which on the previous page he has dismissed. Elsewhere he writes of the 'grandeur mélancolique' which factory chimneys bestow on the horizons of Pantin, (p.88) telling us that 'la beauté d'un paysage est surtout faite de mélancolie.' (p.34) These attributions of poetic feeling are, as they stand, purely arbitrary: Huysmans seems merely to be taking up the debased attitudes of a certain romantic rhetoric without recognising the fact (which suggests a lack of critical awareness in one who criticises those who blindly follow outmoded formulas). P. Ward-Jackson considers that such preconceptions limit Huysmans as a critic, writing for instance:

His pathetic concept of landscape is an obvious heritage from the romantic generation and from Théodore Rousseau in particular. This inheritance (...) accounts for his taste for Raffaelli's dreary suburbs (...) and it at first closed his eyes to the more wholesome qualities of the Impressionists. (69)

But though Huysmans' critical defence of such subjects is unconvincing (perhaps because he fails to realise that, far

from abolishing all preconceptions, realism or naturalism established its own artistic conventions, one of which is the pretence of dispensing with convention), (70) his interest in the diseased urban landscape is worth stressing since it is typical of a view of the outside world common to several naturalist writers, as the next chapter will show.

Ward-Jackson implies that Huysmans failed to appreciate the Impressionists on moral or emotional grounds. But in fact many of his criticisms in L'Art moderne are technical. He dislikes Manet's 'Bar des Folies-Bergère', for instance, because he finds its lighting inaccurate. (pp.295-96) The study of light and colour is indeed for Huysmans a 'vérité scientifique', and discussing the Impressionists' experiments in this field, he asks:

Cette tentative de rendre le foisonnement des êtres et des choses dans la pulvérulence de la lumière ou de les détacher avec leurs tons crus, sans dégradations, sans demi-teintes, dans certains coups de soleil tombant droit, raccourcissant et supprimant presque les ombres, comme dans les images des Japonais, a-t-elle abouti, à l'époque où elle fut osée? -- Presque jamais je dois le dire. (p.104)

Certain Impressionist works even suggest diseases of vision, he claims, to be compared with Charcot's studies of distorted colour perception in hysterical patients. The passage just quoted also reveals the acuteness of Huysmans' own perception of light and shadow; many of his descriptions of paintings in fact display both an impressive verbal virtuosity and a corresponding awareness of the technical problems faced by the painters he is describing. In addition, his reference to a 'vérité scientifique' (p.103) and to Charcot is worth taking up: the language and notions of contemporary science do not escape Huysmans, whatever his disclaimer in 'Émile Zola et

L'Assommoir'. Medical myths frequently appear in naturalist novels: Bonnetain on compulsive masturbation (Charlot s'amuse), Victor Margueritte on hereditary syphilis (Prostituée), and of course the theme of hereditary determinism and degeneration running through Les Rougon-Macquart. In Huysmans' case, hysteria, neurosis, nerves and Charcot's views on the subject constantly resurface throughout his work.

Huysmans' comparison of the innovations brought by Degas and the Goncourts also shows a desire to link art and literature in terms of technique, of finding the appropriate idiom or medium for rendering the world. Huysmans does not claim that the Goncourts and Degas achieve identical effects: his parallel is limited to stating that in their respective fields they have demonstrated new artistic processes -- the Goncourts in psychology and Degas in visual impressions. But both novelists and artist are connected in an extended linguistic metaphor: both have created a new 'vocabulary', overturning conventional language with their 'neologisms'. (p.136ff.) (71) In this analogy, Huysmans moves away from his simplistic notion of realism simply being 'truth to reality' to see it as a language created by the artist. In a sense he begins to anticipate the 'inquiry into the linguistics of the visual image' carried out in E.H. Gombrich's well-known study, Art and Illusion. As Gombrich remarks,

There is no neutral naturalism. The artist, no less than the writer, needs a vocabulary before he can embark on a 'copy' of reality. (72)

The word 'copy' is in any case misleading:

the artist (...) cannot transcribe what he sees; he can only translate it into the terms of his medium. (...) The artist cannot copy a sunlit lawn, but he can suggest it. (73)

Generally, however, Huysmans' analogies between the different arts are much more subjective: the real point of comparison is the emotional effect they produce on the reader or spectator. If the only real analogy for Gustave Moreau's works is in literature, this is because

L'on éprouve, en effet, devant ces tableaux, une sensation presque égale à celle que l'on ressent lorsqu'on lit certains poèmes bizarres et charmants, tels que le Rêve dédié, dans les Fleurs du Mal, à Constantin Guys, par Charles Baudelaire. (p.153) (74)

The evocation in prose of the sensations produced by pictorial art is probably the most outstanding quality of L'Art moderne. In fact paintings which Huysmans likes often sound more like poems in his descriptions of them, or at least emanations of poetic feeling. (75) Thus he may write:

chez M. Millais, la détresse infinie des automnes qui meurent, et le grand frisson de la nature aux approches des ouragans et des nuages, étaient exprimés, (p.33)

barely describing the painting in question, or asking why its details should arouse these impressions in the observer. It is true that Baudelaire remarks:

Les considérations et les rêveries morales qui surgissent des dessins d'un artiste sont, dans beaucoup de cas, la meilleure traduction que le critique en puisse faire. (76)

Yet, to conclude this discussion on L'Art moderne, such an approach does not allow Huysmans to establish a coherent statement of a naturalist or modernist aesthetic against which to assess his or others' fictional works. Instead, we see a wide-ranging fascination with many aspects of modern art (from architecture to typography), and in a fragmentary way glimpse many of the key aspects of naturalism -- an awareness of the untapped artistic resources of the world, an appeal to a notion of truth which demands scientific precision and observation,

a desire to suggest in writing the texture and density of the world of the senses. But such fragments do not amount to a systematic exposition.

Most critics of Huysmans' writing on art in fact agree that systematic objectivity is neither his aim nor his achievement. (77) Henry Amer, for example, in a substantial article on 'Huysmans et la peinture', writes that at every stage of his career, for Huysmans painting has 'un autre but qu'elle-même. Le but qu'il lui assigne a varié autant que lui-même a évolué.' (78) From A rebours onwards, says Amer, he is less and less interested in the technique of painters and more and more in what he considers to be their spiritual content: thus he uses Gustave Moreau to create a myth, a vision of escape from the world, to which painting is simply the means. (79) Later, Grünewald is seen as proof that naturalism and spirituality are reconcilable, (80) and painting becomes a key to the supernatural.

La valeur d'une oeuvre plastique, à la fin, tiendra moins dans ce qu'elle manifeste que dans ce qu'elle signifie.

Et pourtant, au début, la peinture flamande surtout l'attire avec sa perpétuelle fête de couleurs, de mouvements, de truculence. La sensualité qui éclate dans la vie copiée ou rêvée par ces peintres, Huysmans essaie de l'exprimer à son tour dans l'art qu'il a choisi. (81)

The shift is from transposition to significance; art becomes acceptable only if it expresses, not the sensual richness of life, but a religious experience beyond the here-and-now.

This transition takes place most obviously between L'Art moderne and A rebours. In a disingenuous letter to Zola, (82) Huysmans points out the discrepancies between the two works and denies (without much conviction) that he shares des Esseintes's preference for Mallarmé, or La Tentation de saint Antoine and La Faute de l'abbé Mouret with their lurid

treatment of religion, over Germinie Lacerteux or L'Éducation sentimentale. Three chapters of A rebours are substantially devoted to literature (III, XII, XIV) and two to painting (V, IX). In his ferocious appraisals of artists past and present, des Esseintes rejects both modernism and classicism -- works, in other words, which try to place man seen in a general sense in a stable, unified vision of the world. (83) For des Esseintes, on the contrary, the eccentric individual separated from the universe is paramount, and idiosyncratic subjectivity is the primary criterion of artistic appreciation:

tout en désirant se dégager des préjugés, s'abstenir de toute passion, chacun va de préférence aux oeuvres qui correspondent le plus intimement à son propre tempérament et finit par reléguer en arrière toutes les autres.
(A rebours. p.270)

Since many of the critical ideas of A rebours are repeated in Certains five years later (1889), however, it seems more appropriate to look at this second collection of Huysmans' art criticism for examples of his retreat from modernism than to risk duplicating the detailed discussion which is devoted to A rebours in a later chapter.

Certains shares with A rebours what one might call the aristocratic posture -- personified in the novel by des Esseintes himself. Recalling perhaps Baudelaire's dictum that

pour être juste, c'est-à-dire pour avoir sa raison d'être, la critique doit être partielle, passionnée, politique, c'est-à-dire faite à un point de vue exclusif, mais au point de vue qui ouvre le plus d'horizons, (84)

Huysmans, in the first section of Certains. 'Du dilettantisme', demands virulent commitment in critical statements (as opposed to the cautiousness of the 'dilettante' who praises everything and appreciates nothing), exclaiming:

le talent est aux sincères et aux rageurs, non aux indifférents et aux lâches. (p.13)

The majority of humanity probably falls into the second category, for literature is restricted to a hermetic sphere which excludes most people, however much they delude themselves:

Jamais, au grand jamais, personne ne conviendra qu'il est absolument inapte à apprécier un art qui est cependant le plus compliqué, le plus verrouillé, le plus hautain de tous. (pp.8-9) (85)

Elsewhere he remarks that Delacroix's works are 'polluted' by the ignorant gaze of their spectators. (p.187) (86) And Whistler, like Verlaine, has achieved an occult, incantatory art, which explodes the confines of form, to create, the painter claims, 'une divinité d'essence délicate, tout en retrait.' (p.66)

He has

aristocratiquement pratiqué cet art réfractaire aux idées communes, cet art s'effaçant des cohues, cet art résolument solitaire, hautainement secret. (p.66)

Lust and money rule the modern world, according to Huysmans.

The Eiffel Tower -- 'ce suppositoire solitaire et criblé de trous' (p.156) -- is the spire of the church of Capital. (pp.159-60) Taine's theory of milieu is applied à rebours, as it were: the great artist is distinguished by his revolt against the world which surrounds him; only '(les) âmes subalternes' submit to their environment. (pp.20-21)

Such a retreat from the social world, such a refusal to see art as a public gesture, seems nearer the ideas of symbolism than naturalism, especially if (as J. Borie puts it) naturalism is 'une littérature démocratique'. (87) Naturalism might be seen as 'democratic', not in the sense of supporting universal suffrage, social democracy or some sort of direct political action, but rather insofar as it restores all men to equality in the face of the world: both the class war and the aristocratic

élite are swept away by the invincible force of the biological principle (hence the dislike of naturalism expressed by ideologies of both left and right). Jean Rostand argues that Zola

a étendu, élargi notre notion de l'humain. Ajoutant à l'homme des salons, à l'homme des villes, l'homme de la terre et l'homme de dessous la terre, il les a tous soudés ensemble par la bête, et ensuite tous réintégrés et réconciliés dans l'immense et dédaigneuse nature où l'accouchement d'une femme ne compte pas plus que la mise-bas d'une vache! (88)

Auerbach in any case sees a more specific humanitarian intention in a work such as Germinal:

L'art du style a complètement renoncé à produire des effets agréables au sens traditionnel du mot; il est mis au service de la déplaisante, oppressante, désespérante vérité. Mais cette vérité est en même temps un appel à l'action, à la réforme sociale. (89)

Auerbach, however, remarks that such a sense of commitment is alien to both Flaubert and the Goncourts, whose aestheticism springs from a personal isolationism and refusal of social responsibility which can at times seem sterile and peevish. (90) Yet both the Goncourts and Flaubert submit to the realist programme, exhaustively assembling the documents and data which chronicle an age they claim to hate. Huysmans is evidently closer to these writers than to Zola in his outlook. Flaubert and the Goncourts are, precisely, 'de probes et de séditeux et de hautains artistes' in chapter one of La-bas, because they withdraw from their century: the honourable artist must be 'seditious', adopt a purely negative social posture. Zola, on the other hand, is viewed by Huysmans with something approaching contempt for his active intervention in the Dreyfus Affair in 1898. (91)

Edmond de Goncourt remarked that he was drawn to portray the lower classes, 'la canaille', because he found in them the

charm of the exotic and unknown. (92) Huysmans' own attraction towards modern life in 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' and L'Art moderne similarly reveals an impulse which is much more aesthetic than social or humanitarian. His sleazy whores and gloomy landscapes represent a new source of material; his appeals to 'truth' seem to refer to artistic integrity rather than morality; the artist shapes his forms and characters but removes himself from them, existing on a superior level as the 'moniteur des bêtes'. If this aesthetic perspective is borne in mind, Huysmans' open expression of hostility towards the modern world in Certains can be seen, not as a rejection of naturalism generally, but of the humanitarian materialism which is one of its components. But, as the essay on L'Assommoir shows, it is difficult to adopt such a position and avoid contradiction and confusion. Both Flaubert and the Goncourts, whatever their devotion to the 'priesthood' of art, are also associated with a progressive, scientific ideology which explicitly rejects traditional values and hierarchies and consequently appears morally and politically subversive. (93) Madame Bovary is prosecuted; its author is caricatured as a surgeon callously dissecting his victim. The Goncourts (also prosecuted) (94) state in the preface to Germinie Lacerteux (1865) that now 'le Roman s'est imposé les études et les devoirs de la science' and has become 'l'Histoire morale contemporaine.' (95)

A. Guedj, in an article on 'Le Naturalisme avant Zola', provides an excellent analysis of the hostile reactions of critics to realist novels during the Second Empire. Madame Bovary is hailed as 'Le Roman physiologique'; that this in itself implies a condemnation is made clear by an article by A. Legrelle

in the Revue de l'Instruction publique in 1859. Legrelle

ignore la physiologie. La vie organique lui soulève le coeur. Tout ce qui touche au sexe et au corps provoque son indignation. La violence de ses réactions (...) est symptomatique de la force des tabous que le naturalisme violera. Legrelle reproche aux nouveaux romanciers 'leur inadmissible prétention de tout réhabiliter sans rien subordonner'. C'est-à-dire de supprimer toute hiérarchie des valeurs entre l'esprit et la matière, l'âme et le corps. Subordonner signifie d'ailleurs simplement censurer. Certains faits relevant des 'impuretés de la matière' n'ont pas leur place dans une oeuvre d'art. Il y a des bornes qu'on ne doit jamais dépasser. (96)

Description is also generally denounced, says Guedj: the realist obsession with the outer world turns attention away from God and the inner life; determinism, the loss of individual autonomy or free will, is glimpsed as a menacing consequence of this insistence on environment. Objectivity or 'impassibility' is again morally subversive: beneath this neutrality is a refusal of values, good and evil, noble and ignoble.

Naturalism and its antecedents, by its very existence, thus represents an ideological commitment. The paradox of Huysmans' attempt, half-way through his career, to restore traditionalist values -- and specifically those of Catholicism -- to a type of writing which seems inherently opposed to them must be emphasised. He rejects materialism but adheres to a literary language whose main qualities are deliberately materialist, focusing on the world of objects and the flesh, physiology and description. His attempts to resolve this paradox through aestheticism, the supernatural, or a sort of 'Christian' naturalism will be explored in the chapters on A rebours, La-bas and En route. From A rebours onwards, he explicitly withdraws from modernity and scientism; but they constantly reappear as inescapable forces, seemingly embedded in his language. In Certains, Huysmans inaugurates

a debate between science and religion which echoes through his work with an anguished circularity right up to Les Foules de Lourdes, even though he claims to have opted for religion.

In Certains, this contrasting of the scientific and religious views of man occurs in the section devoted to Félicien Rops and eroticism, and forms part of a general attempt in the book to create a 'spiritual' level of existence over and above the contingencies of the physical world. Although Huysmans describes the erotic art of Rops, Rowlandson and the Japanese with an explicit, bawdy gusto, sensual pleasure and sexual love are remote from his concerns. A gruesomely detailed description of a woman copulating with an octopus (pp.78-79) suggests a more sinister cruelty, and Huysmans in fact is interested only in works which reflect a macabre sexuality removed from the everyday or 'l'acte de fornication qui n'est que malpropre.' (p.71) He turns towards 'erethism' -- sexuality of a cerebral or spiritual rather than a genital variety, 'l'au-delà des spasmes.' (p.72) Huysmans wrote to Théo Hannon ten years before Certains: 'Le sperme me paraît s'emmagasiner dans mon cerveau, au détriment de mes couilles,' (97) which helps explain the statement in Certains that 'il n'y a de réellement obscènes que les gens chastes,' (p.70) that is, those who find no physical outlet for their sexual impulses, who submit to 'ce rut qui se passe tout entier dans l'âme et sans que le corps consulté s'en mêle.' (p.72) Science, says Huysmans, fails to explain the causes of this erethism, whereas the Church does:

En somme, ce phénomène est clair pour les catholiques, profondément obscur pour les matérialistes incapables à découvrir dans le cerveau le mécanisme de cette âme qu'ils considèrent ainsi qu'une fonction d'un système nerveux qui se meut seul. (p.74)

The unified 'mechanism' of the human organism adopted by naturalism is contrasted with Christian dualism. By preferring the second, Huysmans is able to give perverted sexuality an additional, absolute value: it becomes the manifestation of a spiritual force outside man, of evil, for the Church attributes erethism to the devil. That Huysmans should consider this religious explanation 'clearer' than a scientific approach shows the curious logic which he practises: belief in an irrational, mysterious force of evil surely represents a refusal, rather than a conclusion, of the investigation which science, however unsatisfactorily, tries to pursue.

Because of this attitude, however, Huysmans is able to give a new cachet to erotic art. Whereas art historians like Ward-Jackson or Brookner dismiss Felicien Rops as a pornographer, (98) for Huysmans he goes beyond the corporeal and investigates an absolute world of sexual evil with 'une âme de Primitif à rebours.' (p.82) While L'Art moderne offers an essentially aesthetic justification for treating disturbing subjects, in Certains the justification is made on religious or 'satanic' grounds. Art failed to realise that 'pour être suraiguë, toute oeuvre devrait être satanique ou mystique.' (p.82) The street-walker of L'Art moderne with her jaded charms displayed against the contemporary urban scene is replaced by

la Femme essentielle (...), la Bête vénéneuse et nue,
la mercenaire des Ténèbres, la serve absolue du Diable. (p.106)(99)

This absolute is, nevertheless, attained through 'la violence de la chair,' (p.96) by taking physiology (the obscene anatomical display of pornography) to its limits. One work by Rops apparently shows a woman crowned with thorns crucified on a

colossal phallus (she is 'couronnée de pines' as J.-L. Bachellier puts it). (100) Woman may here appear as victim rather than temptress, but this blasphemous jest clearly shows the combination of religion and perverse sexuality which fascinates Huysmans. The way in which the flesh, or rather the tortured flesh, is somehow converted to spirit is of course a major theme of La-bas.

Though Huysmans tells Prins in 1890 that in his new book he intends to 'vomit' on naturalism, (101) in fact the discussion in the opening chapter shows a desire for a synthesis of spirit and flesh exemplified for the hero Durtal in Grünewald's representation of the Crucifixion. While the character des Hermies does launch into a virulent attack on naturalism in chapter one of La-bas (ironically, however, using a lurid imagery which sounds like a parody of a certain naturalist style), (102) this onslaught is counteracted by Durtal's rather grudging defence. Des Hermies damns naturalism for the very reason it might have been praised in L'Art moderne -- because it reflects the spirit of its age all too accurately -- but for Durtal its weakness lies in its psychology. The ideal union of body and soul, natural and supernatural which Durtal fails to find in modern literature he has discovered in the Primitives, who achieved an intensity of feeling unknown to writers, 'une transformation de la matière détendue ou comprimée, une échappée hors des sens, sur d'infinis lointains.' (La-bas, I, 13) The magnificently written description of Grünewald's Crucifixion at Cassel (now in Karlsruhe) is meant to demonstrate how this alchemical process, the conversion of matter to spirit through a 'naturalisme spiritualiste', takes place. According to Maingon:

l'expression 'naturalisme mystique' suggère qu'un art vraiment religieux, loin de masquer l'horreur des réalités physiques, doit en la soulignant, montrer un monde surnaturel. La peinture, après avoir été pour Huysmans, au moment de l'époque naturaliste, d'abord une source de plaisir visuel et un moyen d'affirmer son tempérament, puis, au moment d'A rebours, évasion hors du monde, devient donc avec Grünewald, la clé du surnaturel. (103)

But Maingon fails to explain why emphasising physical horror should reveal the supernatural. Certainly Huysmans does stress the unbearable sensual realism of the painting, the abjectness of Christ, with an almost sacrilegious violence. Yet as Maingon observes, classical critics rejected Grünewald because they saw this physical ignominy as mere caricatural debasement; (104) and Huysmans himself sneers at the post-Renaissance painters whose idealised 'débonnaires Golgotha' again turn away from this excessiveness. Though one cannot doubt the sincerity of Huysmans' belief in the transfiguration which he sees in Grünewald (he reiterates the argument of La-bas after his conversion in Trois primitifs, 1905), the abrupt transition from physical torture to spiritual sublimity seems to depend more on an act of faith on the part of the observer than on any quality actually visible in the painting. What in fact, two decades earlier, might simply have been a richly naturalistic spectacle, a macabre enticement to a prose poem like the celebration of the disembowelled ox's carcass in Le Drageoir aux épices, now becomes a theological statement, an illustration of the Incarnation.

Huysmans' preface to an edition of A rebours published in 1903 provides a useful conclusion to this survey of his writing on art and literature, because in this preface, four years before his death, he himself surveys his past works from the position of Catholic belief already announced in La-bas.

The swingeing anti-clericalism of Huysmans' Catholic works (such as L'Oblat) naturally produced hostile reactions from certain members of the Church. In 1898, for instance, the abbé Belleville produced a vituperative (though not unconvincing) denunciation of Huysmans, arguing that a writer could not at one and the same time accept the authority of the Church and live off the income and fame of his past and present immoral works. (105) In his preface, Huysmans tries to rebut such accusations. His defence is that to appreciate an author properly, one must examine the whole of his work from the beginning, and that A rebours shows the first traces of grace in his soul:

ce livre fut une amorce de mon oeuvre catholique qui s'y trouve, tout entière, en germe. (A rebours, p.xxi)

The basis of this defence is essentially extra-literary. A rebours is justified biographically, in retrospect, rather than on grounds of intrinsic merit. And Huysmans indeed seems to consider that his treatment of certain subjects in A rebours is inferior to that in later works. In La Cathédrale, he remarks, 'J'ai animé les pierreries mortes d'A Rebours.' (A rebours, p.xv) because the later novel introduces religious symbolism into the discussion: in other words, Catholic beliefs rather than literary talent are what really 'animate' a work.

The aesthetic position of 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir' or L'Art moderne is virtually reversed in this preface. Whereas before the vast unexploited potential of life was able to provide endless material for the modernist or naturalist artist, who subordinated moral intentions to artistic creation, now, on the contrary, this untapped source has shrunk to nothing: naturalism was condemned to repeat itself, novelists simply reworked on a lesser scale that paragon and paradigm of the unexceptional

everyday, L'Éducation sentimentale. Huysmans, unfortunately, makes no attempt to explain how exactly Flaubert's novel is a model of naturalism. He also complains that in any case naturalist novels tend to boil down to studies of adultery (Madame Bovary, however, is not held up as a model). Fictionalised accounts of everyday life and sexual peccadillos no longer interest Huysmans, in other words. Art should serve a didactic purpose:

Le volume où il n'y a pas de documents avérés, le livre qui ne m'apprend rien ne m'intéresse plus. (A rebours, p.x)

Ironically, he seems to overlook completely the fact that potentially one of the most interesting aspects of the naturalist novel is to serve as a historical or sociological document of an age otherwise confined within history books. (106) Huysmans no doubt had little desire to see chronicled an age which he hated. In his case, fiction has become simply a pretext or convenient framework for furthering other interests. This was already his intention at the time of A rebours, he says. Zola was taken aback by the novel, for he failed to realise

le désir qui m'appréhendait de secouer les préjugés, de briser les limites du roman, d'y faire entrer l'art, la science, l'histoire, de ne plus se servir, en un mot, de cette forme que comme d'un cadre pour y insérer de plus sérieux travaux. (A rebours, p.xiii)

Again, Huysmans fails to remark that this collapse of the fictional is already a feature of naturalism -- the 'scientific', objective inquiry, heavily documented, displacing event, characterisation, and so on. (107) His own expansionist programme is carried so far that a novel like La Cathédrale becomes an encyclopedic catalogue, where external sources overwhelm personal invention.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to conclude that in

this preface Huysmans simply abandons his belief in art as an autonomous activity and makes it subordinate to religious faith. It is significant that he marks out the stages of his conversion, not through personal actions, but through his books; his early feelings in churches are even compared to those produced when one experiences a work of art. As is well known, religion was a vehicle for literature for Huysmans before literature became a vehicle for religion (the search for new material becoming a discovery of faith). (108) But constantly, one feels, his religious works are not simply didactic but autodidactic -- not simply a way of preaching belief to others, but of coming to terms with it oneself by making it into literature.

In an attempt to define that 'aesthetic' view of the world which he sees Huysmans as approaching, James Laver imagines the aesthete as saying:

let us concern ourselves only with the surface pattern of life and let us concentrate our attention upon those parts of it from which aesthetic pleasure can be derived. (109)

Huysmans' preoccupation with surfaces, décor, the 'skin' of reality (a skin which is often pustulent, as Buisine has remarked) (110) is obvious, especially in his early work, with his call for a recording of the modern world and his endeavours to do this himself. From A rebours and Certains onwards, however, the surface of the modern world fails to satisfy him: the dispassionate observer, the aesthetic aristocrat who always sees others as objects rather than with Christian compassion, may continue to walk through his work down to the pages of Les Foules de Lourdes, noting down the most appalling physical deformities in loving detail, but nevertheless there is an obvious change in the judgements

which Huysmans makes about art or artistic material. As Duployé remarks, for des Esseintes value lies not in décor but decoration, that is the aesthetic form given to objects which in themselves are 'empty' by the decorator, the concealment through ornamentation of the 'vide' of all objects in a world without absolute values where 'tout s'égalise.' (111) Huysmans, however, finally supplements the aesthetic quest with the mystical quest, which does not (it claims) attribute values to objects but merely draws out their inherent values as reflections of the absolute, the divine. This pattern of development may begin to seem remote from naturalism. But Huysmans' pronouncements on naturalism, as we have seen, do in fact encompass most of his literary career, from 1877 to 1903, and thus run parallel to this development. Yet far from being a systematic proponent of naturalism, from the beginning Huysmans tries to separate the aspects of it which appeal most to him from the rest: notably the purely 'aesthetic' components from the materialist, philosophical or ideological perspective which they seem to imply. Almost immediately, then, his approach to the subject is condemned to be fragmentary and verge on contradiction. Can one reject the 'spirit' and retain the methods, or rather retain the methods and promote a new spirit, as he declares in La-bas? Before setting out to answer this question, it seems advisable to conclude this chapter by building a more comprehensive definition of naturalism on to the fragments provided by Huysmans.

H. Markiewicz provides a global definition of naturalism which serves as a useful starting point:

Le plus souvent, le naturalisme français est défini par les traits suivants: tendance à suivre les préceptes des sciences expérimentales comprises à la manière positiviste; monisme matérialiste; construction doublement déterministe -- biologique et sociale -- du destin de l'individu; goût pour les descriptions détaillées et bien documentées; préférence pour les thèmes 'bas', 'triviaux', pathologiques et considérés jusqu'alors comme scandaleux. Comme autres traits du naturalisme on cite l'objectivité désintéressée ou -- au contraire -- une critique sociale et une tendance réformatrice, auxquelles correspond respectivement une orientation pessimiste ou optimiste. (112)

In his excellent 'Discussion sur le naturalisme français,' H.A. Hatzfeld stresses the primitive aspects of naturalism, its obsessive exploration of the taboos surrounding birth, sexuality and death. These areas tend to be seen in pathological rather than moral terms in naturalist works. Behind the scientific or medical language, however, lies a fascination with sickness, a tendency to present the whole world in terms of metaphors of disease and degeneration. (113) Hatzfeld also emphasises the linguistic and stylistic innovations of naturalism, (114) as Markiewicz observes:

Hatzfeld comprenait le naturalisme comme un style d'une époque littéraire, en y incorporant à la fois des courants littéraires concomitants -- partiellement le symbolisme, mais avant tout l'impressionnisme littéraire, avec sa vision subjective du monde, sa sensibilité pour les nuances de couleurs, sa manière synesthésiste de créer des images, son style nominal et son style indirect libre. (115)

The main components of naturalism might conveniently be summed up by a tripartite division -- as documentation, determinism and description. The first implies a method, the second an attitude or philosophy, the third a language. While Huysmans, as we have seen, is most attracted to the third element, Zola, on the other hand, tends to stress the first two aspects in his own critical writings. In 'Lettre à la jeunesse', for instance, he is anxious to stress that naturalism is a 'formula' and not

a 'rhetoric' -- 'le mouvement intellectuel du siècle' and not a 'rhétorique de l'ordure.' (116) Zola considers that romanticism's only virtue was in rhetoric, in linguistic innovation -- whereas real progress lies in ideas: 'le naturalisme n'est pas dans les mots (...) sa force est d'être une formule scientifique.' (117) Style for Zola is simply a question of individual personality. As 'Le Roman expérimental' proclaims, the method of naturalism is that of experimental medicine (it is the simplistic literal-mindedness of this analogy that perhaps most devalues this essay), the intention to master intellectual and moral phenomena in the same way as the scientist masters the physical world. (118)

It has already been argued that the language of realism implies -- and was seen by hostile critics to imply -- a method or ideology. If 'toute technique renvoie à une métaphysique,' (119) one can say that, conversely, a philosophy must imply a rhetoric. 'Le Roman expérimental' itself is an exercise in rhetoric, as Wellek has observed. For Zola,

Quoting or paraphrasing Bernard was a rhetorical device -- possibly an unfortunate device -- to cloak his theories with the prestige of contemporary science. (120)

In fact Zola himself admits in the article 'L'Expression personnelle' in Le Roman expérimental that in any age there is a common style, or rather a pool of literary resources and themes. Second-rate writers in particular 'prennent le style qui est dans l'air. Ils attrapent les phrases qui volent autour d'eux;' they draw from 'un immense magasin rempli des phrases connues, des locutions courantes, une sorte de moyenne du style usuel.' (121) To talk of a rhetoric or poetics of naturalism thus seems perfectly valid. Block argues that

If naturalism represents not only an attitude but also a literary tradition and style, it should be possible to discover common devices and techniques in particular naturalistic novels, as well as common underlying assumptions and processes of composition. (122)

The ways in which Huysmans comes to terms in practice with such devices and assumptions will form the subject of the following chapter.

The division of naturalism into three interlinked elements, labelled as documentation, determinism and description, which neither Huysmans nor Zola convincingly separates, could be stated in less simple, but more satisfactory, terms. In one respect, naturalism is a public movement, which demands that its practitioners take up a particular stance towards the literary establishment and, in one way or another, towards the social process, insofar as writing is a social act. The respective positions of Huysmans, Flaubert, Zola and the Goncourts have already been sketched out, with their ensuing differences and contradictions. Secondly, naturalism is, so to speak, a philosophy, or rather a means of expressing a vision of the world through the medium of literature. And thirdly, naturalism implies a style, or rather a mode of writing, which might be called realism, impressionism, transcription and so on. The public aspect of naturalism most obviously links it with other forms of knowledge (science, positivism) and the contemporary world outside literature in which naturalist writers live -- an aspect exemplified by Zola's critical propaganda and shunned by Huysmans. But this aspect is inseparable from the others; or rather each aspect tends to further the others as well as itself. For example, introducing the language of the

urban proletariat into L'Assommoir may be primarily a device which expands the stylistic resources of the novel, but it also involves a moral decision (a new view of man in the world, at least as far as literature is concerned), and at the same time has a scientific, anthropological function, as the attempt to record a relatively uncharted area of speech.

Similarly, the fondness of naturalist authors for exploring taboo areas of experience reveals not simply a desire to cause a literary scandal (Huysmans' Marthe, for one critic, is a 'production obscène'), (123) but also a view of man which is a curious combination of the primitive and the technically sophisticated (the basic facts of life are presented through the jargon of nineteenth-century medicine). (124) Certain naturalist subjects, admittedly, seem to suggest calculated provocation rather than metaphysical reflection on humankind: Bonnetain's study of chronic masturbation, Hennique's account of a lawyer infected by a tapeworm, Huysmans' prose poems on the various aromas of female armpits and myriad shapes of female breasts in Croquis parisiens. However, not only the subjects, but also the mode of expression and form of naturalist works are considered revolutionary and abhorrent by hostile critics. Macrobe's denunciatory brochure La Flore pornographique (1883) is actually a 'Glossaire de l'école naturaliste, extrait des oeuvres de M. Émile Zola et de ses disciples' which lists the supposedly favourite terms of the school, with a 'translation' into French, from 'Allumé: excité par la passion charnelle' (Nana) to 'Volaille: Femme bête' (Les Soeurs Vatar). Céard's novel Une belle journée (1881) has gone down in literary history as a sort of defiant, but futile attempt to capture the shapelessness

of life, which allegedly makes it a 'livre de 346 pages, où il ne se passe rien.' (125) A modern critic, revaluating this novel, in fact demonstrates that it has a highly formalised structure which even recalls that of a classical tragedy. (126)

What, then, are the main features of the naturalist vision and form of expression which seemed so radical? The naturalist view of man, at least in its most caricatural form, is apparently encapsulated in the title of Zola's novel La Bête humaine. The characters in Thérèse Raquin are 'des brutes humaines,' says Zola; and 'chaque chapitre est l'étude d'un cas curieux de physiologie.' (127) A critic like Brunetière, with an essentially Christian or idealistic conception of man, is not even prepared to consider the validity of such an approach. In an article denouncing Jules Vallès, Brunetière writes:

Une nature 'immorale' est celle qui ne sent pas la nécessité, pour l'être faible ou vicieux que nous sommes, d'être toujours et constamment en garde contre les suggestions qui lui viennent de ce que l'on pourrait appeler son fonds d'animalité. (128)

This conception of man ('être faible ou vicieux') is probably at bottom more pessimistic than Zola's: but for Brunetière, the purpose of art is precisely to fit into a general idealising moral framework which represses and supplants this 'fonds d'animalité.' Hence his attack on Zola's 'materialist art':

c'est un art qui sacrifie la forme à la matière, le dessin à la couleur, le sentiment à la sensation, l'idéal au réel; qui ne recule ni devant la trivialité, la brutalité même; qui parle enfin son langage à la foule, je veux dire qui trouve plus facile de donner l'art en proie aux instincts les plus grossiers des masses que d'élever leur intelligence jusqu'à la hauteur de l'art. (129)

A contemporary English critic similarly abuses Zola and his followers for denying 'the personality, liberty, and spirituality of man.' (130)

Though nowadays such expressions of moral outrage merely sound quaintly outdated, it is true that psychology or characterisation in the classic sense seem to have little place in naturalism. Bourneuf and Ouellet suggest that it is perhaps more appropriate to distinguish two sorts of psychology in the novel: the psychic, derived ultimately from Cartesian introspection, where character appears as a reflecting subject; and the organic, derived from eighteenth-century materialism, where character tends to appear as an object. (131) Evidently, naturalism falls into the second category, derived principally in fiction from Balzac, as Pierre Cogné observes:

Avec lui, la psychologie tend à s'extérioriser et à se fixer dans des districts proprement physiologiques. Alors que Racine, ou La Bruyère parvenaient à démonter le cœur ou l'esprit ou les sens, ressort par ressort, pièce par pièce, sans que rien nous permette de nous les représenter 'physiquement', Balzac s'attache au détail qui, pour tout autre, serait insignifiant. (132)

It is thus pointless to complain that a naturalist work fails to achieve the psychological subtlety of a roman d'analyse like Adolphe. The intricate probing of the intellect and emotions of a fine mind is replaced by an attempt to situate man in the world as a social or biological being. (133) Adolphe exists in a sort of physical vacuum; the analysis of individuals and society in this novel is carried out almost entirely from a moral or moralising perspective; characters and places often have so little physical substance that they can be described merely by initials.

Instead of being defensive about the failings of naturalist psychology, one should perhaps emphasise its innovations and modernity. As Colin Smethurst very astutely remarks in his study of Germinal, to say that Zola is no psychologist means

in fact that he no longer obeys the conventions of the psychological novel:

If a great deal of Étienne's conduct is ascribed to basic appetites and instincts, such as aggressiveness or sexuality or both in combination, it is only critics who exist in a pre-Freudian world who can exclude such phenomena from the proper study of psychology. (134)

Freud himself insists on 'the animal nature of the unconscious' and on the determinism behind mental life, that 'nothing in the mind is arbitrary or undetermined.' (135) Naturalism, as it were, begins to lay bare the world of the Id. What is clear is that naturalist man moves in a world fatally preoccupied by death, degeneration and sexuality, as even the titles of certain naturalist works suggest: Le Calvaire (Mirbeau); Le Calvaire d'Héloïse Pajadou (Descaves); La Fin de Lucie Pellegrin (Alexis); Les Funérailles de Francine Cloarec (Hennique); La Saignée (Céard); La Faute de l'abbé Mouret (Zola); Chair molle (Adam); La Chute de Miss Topsy (Rod). The biblical overtones of some of these titles also indicate how naturalism tends to reinterpret Christian notions of sin and suffering in terms of a biological fatality. (136)

Naturalism restores man to the world of instincts and elements, to his place in nature. (137) Social analysis may be supplanted by a wider perspective, which is atemporal and mythic. Dangelzer, contrasting Les Paysans with La Terre, comments:

chez Balzac la lutte pour la terre est sociale, contre une classe, tandis que chez Zola, elle est tout à fait primitive, contre les éléments. (138)

While Germinal, however brilliant its picture of the miners, in purely socio-economic terms offers no solution to their plight (though by 'deifying' capital, Zola is in a sense refusing to submit it to economic analysis), the miners' suffering is finally seen as offering the possibility of redemption and regeneration

in language which combines biology with religious myth. (139)

Both Zola and Huysmans in fact turn towards utopian mythologising at the end of their careers, even if their respective solutions are vastly different. It is this movement from the immediately physical to the mythic, with social or political solutions apparently abandoned, which causes a Marxist critic like Lukács to criticise naturalism and fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century generally:

In all art of this period depicting the present, inability to understand the great problems of the age is accompanied by brutality in the presentation of physical process, veiled by biological mysticism (Zola as against Balzac and Stendhal). (140)

Terry Eagleton summarises Lukács's critique of naturalism as follows:

Meticulously observed detail replaces the portrayal of 'typical' features; the dialectical relations between men and their world give way to an environment of dead, contingent objects disconnected from characters; the truly 'representative' character yields to a 'cult of the average'; psychology or physiology oust history as the true determinant of individual action. It is an alienated vision of reality, transforming the writer from an active participant in history to a clinical observer. (141)

Ironically some of Lukács's complaints against naturalism (whatever their accuracy) sound curiously like those of the authoritarian Catholic Brunetière, perhaps because in both cases the basis of the objection is ideological and essentially extra-literary. (142)

In a recent article on 'Lukács, Zola and the Aesthetics of Realism,' B. Nelson notes that Brecht pointed out that Lukács's position towards 'realism' was in fact based on a sort of ^{con}servative nostalgia for a lost harmony between the individual and the world. (143) It is quite unjust, Nelson

argues, to say that Zola ignores history or politics; a novel like La Curée constitutes 'a forceful political statement.' (144) Nevertheless, Nelson admits that this novel 'does not reveal a vision of history as a process' (145) but, on the contrary, translates 'a vision of alienation, dehumanization and wasted energies in a society dominated by money.' (146) Political and personal degeneration is a theme which runs throughout Les Rougon-Macquart, even if the possibility of regeneration is glimpsed after La Débâcle. From L'Éducation sentimentale onwards, as another commentator, R. Terdiman, argues, history is no longer 'the force that generates and reveals truth in the world,' experience is no longer chronologically determined. (147) Consequently, one can see that naturalism through its very physiological and sociological investigations is led to reject the possibility of positive individual or collective action, and is thus confronted with a bleak, biological pessimism. Nature (rather than the soul or political interaction) may be the final arbiter of existence, but nature is inhuman and caught up in a process of corruption.

Naturalist authors found a certain intellectual support for their pessimism in the ideas of Schopenhauer. In a recent book (on which the comments in this paragraph are largely based), (148) René-Pierre Colin concludes that although authors like Zola, Maupassant, Céard or Huysmans knew parts of Schopenhauer's work to a greater or lesser degree, it is easier to talk of affinities between philosopher and novelists than of direct influence and genuine understanding of his philosophy. Huysmans mentions Schopenhauer in A rebours and A vau-l'eau, for instance, but in A vau-l'eau merely so as to

provide a convenient aphorism for Folantin's pessimism ('la vie de l'homme oscille comme un pendule entre la douleur et l'ennui,' A vau-l'eau p.85). For Schopenhauer, the individual will is part of a cosmic will-to-live; but this fragmentation is a source of evil. Individuation causes suffering; Céard, quoting this view, writes to Zola:

L'humanité est une grande maladie dont chaque individu est une manifestation pathologique. (149)

(In a recent article, P. Citti argues that the individual, by virtue of being individualised, is put in a position of conflict in the naturalist novel. (150) One thinks, perhaps, of Étienne Lantier, whose political education makes him both a dissatisfied revolutionary and a social outcast.) History is an illusion:

L'ennui, dès lors, n'est plus une simple lassitude, un pessimisme diffus: le temps qu'on croyait vivant, mouvant, se répète, se fige. Il n'est plus question, à la lumière du devenir hégélien d'agir dans une temporalité régénératrice. La roue d'Ixion, le rocher de Sisyphe, images chères à Schopenhauer, n'en finissent pas de tourner en vain. (151)

Schopenhauer offers various possibilities of redemption, which naturalist authors may fail to appreciate or simply find unacceptable: notably, renunciation of the will and escape from egotism, or contemplation of the Idea. (152) Céard, Colin notes, preaches resignation, but this is essentially submission to the will to live; (153) while for Zola abnegation of the will to live is simply a sign of impotence. (154)

These views are clearly echoed in the work of Huysmans. The unhappy individual like M. Folantin in A vau-l'eau is both isolated from the world and menaced by the world; he is caught up in a forever repeated cycle of frustration, as he fails either to withdraw from life or be integrated into life.

The notion of aesthetic detachment, quoted by Colin from The World as Will and Representation, seems close to the solution propounded by A rebours:

L'artiste 'arrache l'objet de la contemplation au ~~durant~~ rapide qui emporte les choses et l'isole devant soi: cet objet unique, qui dans cette fuite universelle n'était qu'un atome invisible, devient à ses yeux le représentant du tout, l'équivalent des choses innombrables situées dans l'espace et dans le temps; il enraye la roue du temps; les relations disparaissent: l'essence, l'Idée, voilà son objet.' (155)

Huysmans' exploration of this issue will be discussed more fully in the chapter on A rebours. It seems useful, however, to conclude ^{these} comments on some of the main features of naturalism by pointing out that naturalism as a form of writing generally may turn from its pessimistic view of the world towards a self-justifying aestheticism.

This is not a view which would be accepted by certain modern critics. S. Heath, for instance, in the first chapter of his book The Nouveau Roman, gives a deliberately simplified definition of realism in order to provide a convenient contrast with the aims of the 'nouveau roman'. Realism (or naturalism), says Heath, is 'the repetition of a discourse as absence of discourse,' is 'naturalized as writing "without thickness";' 'realist writing declares itself transparent before the fixed source of "Reality".' (156) Todorov, discussing vraisemblance in Poétique, explains that the vraisemblable consists, not in a direct relation of discourse to referent (i.e. of the book to life), but of discourse to what readers think is true, that is, to 'public opinion', itself another sort of discourse. Whereas classical poetics allowed different genres their own vraisemblance.

La doctrine du naturalisme se situe au pôle opposé. Les naturalistes n'admettent pas qu'ils se réfèrent à des règles de genre; leurs écrits doivent être vrais, et non vraisemblables. (157)

Even if this is true in theory (and Maupassant's comments on 'illusionism' and verisimilitude in his preface to Pierre et Jean, as has already been noted, indicate that this lack of self-consciousness is not always the case), it is certainly not in practice.

A well-known definition of the 'new novel' says that 'le roman n'est plus l'écriture d'une aventure, mais l'aventure d'une écriture.' (158) Somewhat ironically, this proclamation actually echoes a remark made by Valéry on the language of realism:

Le réaliste (...) cherche à obtenir le trompe-l'oeil par l'excessif du 'style'. Goncourt, Huysmans paraissent... Un langage extraordinaire est appelé à suggérer des objets ordinaires. Il les métamorphose. Un chapeau devient un monstre, que le héros réaliste, armé d'épithètes invincibles, chevauche, et fait bondir du réel dans l'épopée de l'aventure stylistique. (159)

The very attempt to capture the density, the materiality of reality produces a type of writing so dense or entangled that it is difficult to penetrate 'beyond' it and see the reality it is supposedly striving to convey. We do not simply perceive 'l'effet de réel' but rather the attempt to create 'l'effet de réel'. Flaubert may talk of his desire to 'faire sentir presque matériellement les choses,' (160) but, Bersani argues:

The tortuous care with which Flaubert seeks to make language transparent to reality consecrates the very opaqueness of language which he dreaded. For his realism entails a kind of attention to words which can only make them appear heavy and unmanageable. (161)

'The word as object tends to replace the world of objects.' (162) J. Dubois suggests that the realist text contains 'deux exigences difficilement conciliables': on the one hand, it has to set up the complex symphony of its fictive structure; on the other, it has to prove its authenticity (or transparency) by denying its fictive nature and appealing to the real world. (163)

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In fact the two tendencies are carried out simultaneously, with the second always running the risk of being reabsorbed into the first: 'writing' overcomes 'realism'. In a study of Zola's descriptive technique, P. Hamon says that Zola's goal is, in theory, to provide an exhaustive presentation of the real, but that in order to insert his descriptions into his narrative, he has to create a whole series of mechanisms (windows, heights, mirrors etc.) which serve a purely functional purpose. Consequently a kind of 'thématique vide' arises: for such mechanisms refer, not to the real world, but to the structure of the book in which they appear. (164)

This awareness of the self-reflexive character of naturalist writing is expressed even by the first critics of the genre, though perhaps with less sophistication. These initial criticisms are essentially moralistic: Lemaitre, Brunetière, Bigot or Vogüé see the naturalists as aesthetic mandarins, cut off from reality, interested only in 'artificial', technical expertise. (165) Lemaitre's strictures can be found in his review of A rebours: and clearly by emphasising the 'unnatural' qualities of naturalism, he is able to show A rebours as the logical conclusion of a trend, and not at all as a reversal.

This concluding survey of naturalism is not simply intended to provide a convenient synthesis of the main aspects of the movement. Many commentators have already undertaken this task. (166) But the discussion of Huysmans' writings on art and literature has shown that, however perceptive he may be as a critic, his approach, like that of Zola before him, tends to be polemical and journalistic. Like Zola he is skilled in

deriding outmoded conventions and pitilessly exposing the inadequacies of academic painters. Yet the reader is less satisfied when the two critics turn to defining their own brand of realism; their own views now tend to seem equally dated and simplistic. (167) Huysmans in particular never seems to realise the contradictions he is exposing himself to in his attempts to deny the ideological aspects of naturalism. Consequently it seems vital to end this chapter by suggesting a critical framework for approaching Huysmans' own practice as a writer of naturalist fiction which takes a wider view than his own theoretical statements. The division of naturalism into three main aspects (a public movement, a literary vision, a mode of writing) enables one to go beyond the simple opposition between Huysmans' supposed hostility to naturalism's 'spirit' and his sympathy for its 'style' and attempt to analyse the complex nature of the tensions and contradictions in his work: his attitude towards history and the social process; the debate between positivism and the supernatural; the borderline between fiction and documentary; the desire to make language express the ineffable. The guidelines sketched out in this chapter will be used in the analysis of all these themes.

* * * * *

CHAPTER TWO

HUYSMANS' FIRST THREE NOVELS:

MODELS OF NATURALISM?

A l'amphithéâtre

Sur la pierre froide elle est toute nue:
Ses grands yeux jaunis sont restés ouverts.
Sa chair est livide avec des tons verts,
Car le corps est vieux et la morte pue.

Bouchez-vous le nez; admirez pourtant:
Elle est encore belle en sa pourriture,
Dans une impudique et folle posture,
Attendant le ver, son dernier amant.

Elle va goûter de tristes caresses,
Et, pour consommer ce lugubre amour,
Elle a conservé le délire lourd,
Le charme malsain des vieilles ivresses.

Mes dégoûts subits pour ses baisers froids,
J'en sais maintenant l'affreuse origine:
N'était-elle pas cadavre et vermine
Dans nos douloureux amours d'autrefois?

--Fouille, Carabin, nerfs, ventre, cervelle.
Dénude les os, découpe les chairs.
Pour connaître à fond celle qui fut belle,
Ne craignons ni sang corrompu, ni vers.

Quand nous n'aurons plus qu'un amas informe,
Que d'épars tronçons d'un cadavre mou,
Comme un vieux chien mort, afin qu'elle y dorme,
Nous la jetterons au fond d'un grand trou.

(Paul Alexis)

L'Éducation sentimentale: 'Voilà le modèle du roman naturaliste, cela est hors de doute pour moi,' wrote Zola in 1879; (1) and for Huysmans, twelve years later, Flaubert's novel was 'le vrai, le seul, livre naturaliste au sens exact du mot.' (2) The modern reader, nevertheless, would probably feel uncomfortable at the idea of setting up L'Éducation sentimentale as the archetypal naturalist novel: apart from the subversive irony of the book and its ambitious historical perspective, qualities not often found in the naturalist works which followed it, (3) it is most noticeably lacking in the sense of physiological or biological fatalism which is a vital ingredient of many naturalist texts. J. Borie, however, provides a comment which offers a useful gloss on what Zola and Huysmans perhaps meant in their enthusiasm:

pour la génération qui va suivre Flaubert, L'Éducation sentimentale fournit le cadre et le langage qui permettent au vécu de se parler et de se rationaliser dans ces 'expériences' exemplaires: la désillusion, l'usure, la répétition, la négation de l'histoire. (4)

While Zola does in fact try to incorporate history into his study of the degeneration of the Rougon-Macquart in the Second Empire, (5) Huysmans, in his early novels, presents purely private dramas, so that his cyclical account of disillusion and failure in En ménage (1881) reads like an imitation of L'Éducation sentimentale in a minor key.

A more obvious model of naturalism, of course, is L'Assommoir, which combines the humane and moving study of one individual whose career follows a parabola of success and decline in a menacing urban environment with a more general presentation of working-class culture and speech, tableaux of Paris life, in a highly dramatic and colourful way. For one contemporary reviewer, Huysmans' novel Les Soeurs Vataud (1879), published

two years after Zola's book and dedicated to him, was 'une sorte de seconde dilution de l'Assommoir.' (6) No one would want to claim that Huysmans' first three published novels were anything other than minor works, either in terms of his own literary production or literary history generally. But this need not detract from their interest to the student of naturalism, as Raimond has indicated:

Des romans de moindre envergure (que ceux de Zola) et parfois de deuxième ou de troisième ordre nous aident à respirer l'air d'un temps; parce qu'ils ont moins de secrets que les chefs-d'oeuvre, ils livrent mieux leur mode de fonctionnement, comme on dit de nos jours... (7)

And René-Pierre Colin notes that while obscure authors like Alexis, Bonnetain or Hennique tend to be neglected,

C'est pourtant chez de tels romanciers que les poncifs, les recettes les mieux éprouvées, voire ce qu'il faudrait appeler l'idéologie du Naturalisme se décèlent le plus facilement. (8)

How far do Huysmans' early novels encapsulate the commonplaces of naturalism, both reveal and help establish the themes and techniques of a literary genre? This is the question which this chapter will attempt to answer. If the three novels Marthe (1876), Les Soeurs Vatard, and En ménage are tentatively proposed as models, this is partly because they are taken as typical examples of a mode of writing prevalent in the first two decades of the Third Republic which was outlined in the previous chapter. But the main focus of the argument, as always, will be on the development of Huysmans himself as a writer of fiction, the question being, more accurately, how far his early works allow him to establish a model of writing from which the later major works, discussed in the second half of this thesis, can be derived.

The chronological approach already proposed will be continued in this chapter and the next -- the general movement

being towards the rupture with modernism after L'Art moderne (1883). While this chapter deals with Huysmans' longer fiction before A rebours, the next will deal with his short stories, and mainly A vau-l'eau, written immediately after En ménage.

It was argued in the last chapter that naturalism can conveniently be approached in three interrelated ways: as a public movement, as an attitude or philosophy, and as a form of writing. The provocative aspects of naturalism's public manifestations are well indicated by the title and publication of Huysmans' first novel. Marthe: histoire d'une fille appeared in Brussels because the author feared its supposedly uncompromising subject matter, blatantly announced in the title, might risk prosecution in France. The copies he attempted to smuggle back to Paris were apparently seized by the Customs; (9) on the strength of having produced this spicy work, Huysmans was then invited to write a preface to Gamiani, a pornographic novel attributed to Musset. (10) Edmond de Goncourt, who published his own study of prostitution the year after Marthe, himself feared he was inviting retribution from the state; (11) but, like La Fille Élisa, Marthe is in fact an uncontroversial, low-key study of the subject, with none of the masterly exuberance of 'La Maison Tellier' or the grandiose symbolism of Nana. Huysmans himself in later years dismissed the novel as 'un vieil ovaire de jeunesse fécondé par un spermatozoïde égaré de de Goncourt.' (12)

Since then the book has attracted little critical attention, apart from a useful annotated edition by Pierre Cogne and a dexterous English translation by Robert Baldick. (13)

In a recent feminist article, Hilde Olrik hints darkly that this masculine conspiracy of silence is due to disquiet at some of Huysmans' remarks about prostitution; but a more likely explanation seems to be that most readers have doubtless agreed with Gide, who found the novel 'parfaitement déplorable'. (14) One of the major drawbacks of Marthe is the impenetrability of much of the language it is written in. Many of Cogny's notes are simply lexical explanations, the first telling us, for instance, that the name Ginginet comes from 'ginginer: faire une oeillade.' Edmond de Goncourt rebuked Huysmans for not being able to

résister quelquefois à la tentation d'une expression de lettré, au charme du mot brillant, tapageur ou curieusement archaïque, et cela vous amène parfois à tuer la réalité d'une scène très bien architecturée, et très savamment conduite par un coup de pistolet littéraire. (15)

Huysmans himself regrets the convoluted nature of his language in the preface to the French edition of Marthe (1879), although his next novel Les Soeurs Vatar tends to offend in a similar way.

Many of the author's linguistic excesses occur in the speech of one of the main characters, the actor Ginginet, whose 'argot frelaté' is especially outrageous (and sometimes incomprehensible). Olrik attempts to present Ginginet as a sort of counterpart to Marthe, both of whom are outcasts from bourgeois society (unlike the third main character Léo, the failed artist who finally embraces bourgeois respectability):

hors-la-loi, il est celui qui méprise l'ordre bourgeois et s'y oppose. (...) Sa voix acquiert d'autant plus d'importance que Ginginet est le seul des trois personnages que la focalisation interne du narrateur n'atteint pas. (...) C'est sa voix crue et drue qui nous happe et nous agresse. (16)

But Cogny's opinion of Ginginet's strident speech seems more appropriate:

Mélange de vieux mots en circulation depuis Rabelais et conservés pour leur sonorité évocatrice et gaillarde et

de termes populaires franchement vulgaires, son vocabulaire est aussi ridicule, déséquilibré et désuet, que peut être agaçante et dépourvue de toute vérité la pseudo-prononciation germanique de Nucingen chez Balzac. (17)

And he dismisses the character as 'une manière de florilège des poncifs en usage sur la vie de théâtre.' (18) Ginginet, it might be added, is simply overdrawn -- grotesque both verbally and physically, as the first description of him suggests:

Le comédien déploya le papier et les coins de ses lèvres remonterent jusqu'aux ailes de son nez, découvrant des gencives frottées de rouge, faisant craquer le masque de fard et de plâtre qui lui vernissait la face. (Marthe, p.12)

With or without make-up, he is permanently on stage -- not an actor disguised as a clown, but simply a clown, as his caricatural grin in this extract suggests. His departure from the book, as a corpse being sliced open on the autopsy table, gives him a suitably melodramatic exit.

Apart from this linguistic eccentricity, various possible interpretations of Marthe may suggest themselves to the reader. The blunt sub-title indicates a barely fictionalised account of prostitution; more narrowly perhaps, a biography of one particular prostitute, a study of female psychology under harrowing conditions; or more widely, an account of Parisian low life. In view of the dominant role given to Léo, and his abortive liaison with Marthe, one thinks also of a latterday, less romanticised 'scène de la vie de Bohème'. Hilde Olrik, on the other hand, seems to see the book as revealing the hypocrisy of a male-dominated bourgeois society's attitude towards the prostitute. She also claims that Huysmans provides us with many precise details about the conditions of prostitutes, (19) but really this is somewhat questionable. Certainly he shows us Marthe engaging in various types of prostitution or near-prostitution, as a promiscuous ouvrière.

being kept by a rich man, living with Léo but having other lovers, working in a licensed brothel, but apart from brief references to the fact that as a licensed prostitute she is under the jurisdiction of the Préfecture (e.g. p.38, p.67, p.95, p.126), Huysmans is not very informative about the legal and social conditions of prostitution. One does not find an equivalent of the specific criticism of the cruelty of the penal system expressed by La Fille Élisa. for instance; (20) Marthe is much more a moral or psychological examination than a treatise. If one looks at a later work like Victor Margueritte's Prostituée (1907), which describes the judicial system which allowed licensed prostitution under the Third Republic in very great detail (also mentioning the associated problems of venereal disease, homosexuality, pornography, and the general position of lower-class women), it seems quite apparent in comparison that Huysmans had little interest in a documentary enquiry of this sort.

Pierre Cogny points out that he ignored the statistical evidence quite readily available to him (such as Dr Parent-Duchâtelet's well-known treatise of 1836), presumably preferring to write from personal experience (which was probably not inextensive) or imagination. As it happens, on the one occasion Huysmans uses information he must have obtained from external sources, it is inserted rather obtrusively into the story -- in the account of the manufacture of false pearls at the beginning of chapter two. Though it is interesting to hear that a false pearl is worth almost a day's wage, it seems disproportionate to spend more time on this account than, say, Marthe's childhood or parents, or her confinement, particularly as the main function of the atelier is to provide an atmosphere of sexual corruption

that will set the heroine off on the road to perdition. In contrast, Les Soeurs Vatard contains many scenes set in an atelier de brochage, yet the author avoids intrusive discursions on the techniques and costs of bookbinding, except where these radically affect the career of his characters. Huysmans at least does not go as far as Paul Adam in his urge for documentary authenticity: in this author's first novel, Chair molle (1885), also an 'histoire de fille', the final chapter simply reproduces a hospital 'billet de santé' which brutally reports that the heroine, now literally reduced to a fiche, has died of 'hépatite syphilitique'.

Medical details in Marthe, on the other hand, are dealt with fairly discreetly, as far as the heroine is concerned. Cogny attributes the author's reticence in describing the birth of her child in chapter two to his misogynic horror of the more intimate details of female physiology. (21) (This horror did not stop him writing a gruesomely obscene sonnet about cunnilingus and menstruation, however.) (22) His restraint may also be related to the moral, or moralising, tone he adopts in certain passages of Marthe, which contrasts strangely with the caricatural verve and cynicism of his descriptions of the theatre or Léo's affairs. One feels that Huysmans, though not in any sense writing a sociological study of prostitution, cannot resist the temptation to generalise from Marthe's position, implicitly claiming he is showing us typical scenes of the life of the harlot high and low. This may lead to a loss of immediacy in his presentation -- the rapidity with which Marthe has her baby during a howling gale in an icy hotel room and the child and lover are killed off is near melodrama -- and to a sententious, or even sentimental, narratorial

tone. Thus he observes: 'Un atelier de femmes, c'est l'anti-chambre de Saint-Lazare,' (p.24) preparing us for the worst; after her escape from the maison, Marthe, 'Comme toutes les malheureuses,' (p.42) feels a bizarre attraction towards degradation, a 'nostalgie de la boue,' which will drag her back to her destruction, we are told; living a brutalised existence with Ginginet in chapter nine, 'Marthe était arrivée à cette phase où les sens ne vivent plus que par secousses.' (p.101) Each episode, it seems, is a phase in a predictable, inevitable pattern.

There is a similar attempt to universalise Léo's experiences as a poor bachelor: living with Marthe, he suffers 'les terribles désillusions du concubinage;' (p.61) living alone, he endures 'ces terribles détails de la vie qui brisent les plus fiers.' (pp.86-87) Unfortunately, these generalisations tend to ring rather false. The author adopts a knowledgeable manner, to the extent of dissociating himself from 'literature'--

Une fillette ne choppe pas, comme le disent les romanciers, par amour, par entraînement des sens, mais beaucoup par orgueil et un peu par curiosité (pp.24-25)

-- telling us that the life of a licensed prostitute is 'plus effroyable que toutes les géhennes rêvées par les poètes.' (p.33) And yet most of the time his own account is eminently literary. Far from remaining neutral in tone, Huysmans aims at a rather facile sympathy for Marthe, verging on the cliché. 'Oh! qu'elle les méprisait ces gens qui venaient la voir!' he exclaims; (p.37) but then, not content with this flourish, he goes beyond Marthe's limited perspective to look at these clients, introducing an elaborate and curious metaphor:

Elle ne comprenait pas que la plupart de ceux qui s'attardaient près d'elle (...) après avoir été

emportés par les femmes qu'ils aimaient, après avoir humé
des vins capiteux dans les verres de mousseline et s'être
cahiré les lèvres aux éclats de ces verres, (...) ne
vraient plus boire que des vins frelatés dans les chopes
épaisses des cabarets! (p.37) (23)

Of this sentence, Cogny writes:

Aspect particulier du pessimisme de Huysmans qui ne voit,
dans la femme, qu'un inférieur instrument de plaisirs
frelatés. (24)

Thus comment misses, however, the generalised sense of disillusion
which takes the metaphor beyond simple misogyny: one accepts the
worst because dissatisfaction is then guaranteed, or rather,
the inferior satisfaction offered by the prostitute (and not
all women, as Cogny implies) is a cynical compensation for the
deceptions of love.

The philosophy of renunciation which concludes Céard's
Une belle journée and En ménage, and which in fact, as one critic
observes, is a keynote of naturalism --

La honte, la chute, la déchéance, la litanie des vies
avortées marquent les oeuvres des romanciers naturalistes
mineurs (25)

-- thus already emerges in Marthe. However grotesque a figure
he may be, Ginginet is occasionally given a pessimistic,
ironical wisdom. When he informs Léo of Marthe's return to
prostitution in chapter six, he calls this 'un retour à
l'honnêteté': (p.80) the usual opposition between the 'fille
honnête' and the 'fille de joie' is reversed. It is her
aspirations towards love that were dishonest; the mercenary
relationship is the only one that can exist between the sexes,
it is implied. Elsewhere, Ginginet tells us, 'C'est décidément
bien vrai qu'il n'y a que la foi qui sauve...et la bêtise...' (p.95)
Whatever the biographical irony of the first option, Léo, like
André and Cyprien in En ménage, turns towards the second,

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consciously choosing bourgeois mediocrity as an alternative to uncomfortable, but possibly creative, bohemian isolation.

According to Hubert Juin:

la morale de Marthe, elle est dans le rangement que choisit Léo, dans ce quelque chose qui ressemble à un renoncement sinistre et qui clôt le livre. (26)

Cogny says Léo is 'inhumé dans le morne caveau d'un mariage sans joie,' (27) but this outlet is of his own choosing. There is no reason why we should necessarily agree with the cynical awareness of his final letter; his dismissal of Marthe in fact seems callously hypocritical. His concluding remark that women like Marthe 'servent de repoussoir à l'honnêteté,' (p.140) apart from its smugness, is further devalued by Ginginet's contradictory, if equally cynical, view of 'honnêteté'.

Despite his moralising comments throughout the text, the author does not really conclude with any clear 'moral'. The characters are simply dismissed -- Ginginet is killed off, Léo is married off, Marthe disappears back to prostitution. (28) Léo's marriage is perhaps a sort of death -- of artistic aspirations. Huysmans' novels perpetuate the opinion of the Goncourt brothers (in Manette Salomon, for example) that women and art are virtually irreconcilable. (29) The ways in which Marthe and Berthe impede the creative work of Léo and André in Marthe and En ménage respectively are described with a certain relish. Léo, the would-be artist struggling with the problems of celibacy, is essentially the prototype of André Jayant, who is developed more substantially in the later novel. If the Léo-figure becomes more and more dominant in subsequent works, the central female protagonists,

Marthe or the Vatarde sisters, are rapidly abandoned. After Marthe too the prostitute is simply seen as a minor figure who relieves some of the heroes' sexual frustrations and has little or no individualised personality of her own. (30)

While Ginginet is seen almost entirely externally, as a vociferous, gesticulating clown, Léo's inner life predominates over any account of his actions or voice. Olrik has pointed out that Léo's speech is hardly ever recorded. (31) Marthe herself is seen in a more balanced manner. Her physical charms allow her success in the theatre, (32) where she is in fact the only attractive figure among a collection of grotesque performers and cacophonous musicians endlessly barracked by an abusive audience. On the other hand, Huysmans' attempts to present her psychological make-up are less straightforward. Cogny claims that she functions according to a sort of hereditary equation, which might be held to typify the simplistic, pseudo-scientific psychology of naturalism: 'paresse' plus 'névrose' divided by a refusal of total misery 'equal' prostitution. (33) But her downfall is not explained quite so categorically; it is partly due to circumstance, partly to a rather melodramatic urge towards self-destruction, 'le vertige des gouffres'. (p.42) Nevertheless, it is true that Huysmans in the second chapter somewhat laboriously tries to establish the essential components of her environment (wretched parents, despatched in two short paragraphs) and personality. Her character contains some strange combinations of qualities:

une appétence de bien-être (...), un alanguissement morbide, une disposition à la névrose qu'elle tenait de son père, une certaine paresse instinctive qu'elle tenait de sa mère (...) fourmillaient et bouillonnaient furieusement en elle. (pp.23-24)

It may seem odd to describe languor or sloth as 'seething and

boiling' in someone; but in any case, apart from these initial references to these hereditary traits, Huysmans never really tries to present a deterministic, hereditary thesis -- heredity and neurosis in fact will play a far greater role in A rebours. (34)

His comparative restraint in this domain becomes clear if, to widen the discussion at this point, one contrasts Marthe with another minor, but infamous, naturalist novel, Bonnetain's Charlot s'amuse... (1883). Bonnetain has had the misfortune to go down in literary history as the author of a book on compulsive masturbation (he was, apparently, dubbed 'Bonnemain' by his contemporaries) (35) and, in addition, as the co-signatory of a manifesto denouncing Zola as a scurrilous pornographer. He is cruelly derided in Bloy's novel Le Désespéré (1887) both as 'Hilaire Dupoignet', and as himself:

Bonnetain, le Paganini des solitudes dont la main frénétique a su faire écumer l'archet... (36)

In fact, although Bonnetain was prosecuted -- and acquitted -- for Charlot, (37) and although G.J. Becker extravagantly calls the novel 'a really scabrous book and the most scandalous product of the entire naturalistic movement,' (38) if one actually reads this work, one discovers that the only salacious or suggestive parts are the title and the epigraph taken from Bouvard et Pécuchet. (39) Far from being a tongue-in-cheek piece of pornography, the novel is an earnest though somewhat morbid treatise on warped sexuality, in which heredity plays a large and sinister part. 'Votre livre me plaît,' says Henry Céard in his preface,

parce qu'il montre l'hérédité avec toutes ses épouvantes et le physiologique fonctionnement de la fatalité. (...) Il me plaît par sa conception médicale, par son air de thèse pathologique (...), plus encore que le littérateur, le vieux carabin qui est en moi trouve un confrère. (40)

But if Charlot s'amuse... is still worth consideration, it is because so many of the stock devices and themes of the naturalist novel make their appearance with a fascinating inevitability -- and the book thus provides us with a very useful catalogue for assessing other works.

Among these commonplaces, one can note virulent anti-clericalism (educated by monks, who lead a 'démoralisante existence de castrats...dans le bain catholique,' (41) Charlot is nevertheless soon seduced by Brother Origène, who later literally castrates himself with a fountain pen); nature is seen in the sexualised terms found in so many naturalist novels, spring bursting forth and 'mettant comme un furieux besoin de rut'; (42) and one finds the substantial constructions which are a rather hackneyed feature of 'écriture artiste' ('il rêvait...de couvrir d'inavouables caresses leur imberbe gracilité').(43) At the same time, Bonnetain describes the conditions of liaisons with ouvrières, criticises and presents the vicious circle of prostitution, and regales us with many of the descriptive setpieces common to naturalist novels: the railways; rainstorms; sleazy suburbs and tenements; effects of light. But milieu essentially provides a picturesque backcloth for the author's view of human psychology. Superficially, Bonnetain's conception of behaviour may appear to be very mechanistic (the force expended by compulsive onanism has to be replaced or debilitation results), (44) but in fact, far from having an effect of scientific precision, his use of medical terminology acts almost in an incantatory way, as a sort of appeal to mysterious forces which dominate the life of the individual. Thus we read of Charlot and his mistress in

the 14th chapter, for instance:

Également détraqués, l'un par son mal héréditaire, l'autre par six ans de prostitution qui n'avaient qu'excité son étrange utéromanie, ils s'aimèrent éperdûment, mêlant dans un continuel contact leurs dissemblables névroses. (45)

Sexuality is not seen with a clinical, dispassionate eye, but, on the contrary, in lurid emotional terms. The author usually adopts a high-pitched tone of Victorian denunciation; homosexuality and masturbation are presented as loathsome and destructive. We hear of 'les monstrueux mystères des pratiques unisexuelles,' (46) or that '...Origène oubliâ ses craintes, repris de ses désirs malsains et obscènes d'onaniaque.' (47)

Borie suggests that Charlot s'amuse... sums up not merely the clichés of a literary movement, but the medical myths of an epoch. (48) The creation of this mythology is noted by Corbin, in a recent account of nineteenth-century views on morbid heredity:

Tout se passe comme si les médecins étaient amenés à traduire dans un langage scientifique les fantasmes qui hantaient la bourgeoisie de leur temps; mais ce faisant, ils apportaient à ces mêmes fantasmes la caution qui permettait à l'imaginaire de se muer en certitude scientifique. (49)

Thus whatever the systematic absurdity of Charlot, (50) the novel justifies this parenthetical survey, both because it encapsulates three of the main aspects of naturalism (the breaking of taboos, an insistence on physiology, the use of a language apparently scientific but in reality mostly derived from established literary mannerisms) and because by virtue of its extremity it offers a convenient yardstick against which to measure naturalist novels such as Marthe.

Huysmans' treatment of the medical myths and obsessions of his time in Marthe seems, then, to be relatively muted; the book ends nevertheless with a doctor dissecting Ginginet's

corpse and giving a lecture on alcoholism to his assembled students. But it is actually in A rebours, En rade and La-bas that he treats topics like syphilis, neurosis and hysteria in most detail. Olrik points out that Huysmans uses a variety of styles and tones in Marthe, as though he were attempting 'un grand pastiche de l'écriture et des théories naturalistes.' (51) The simplest view of the novel does in fact seem to be that it is a sort of essai in naturalist writing, starting from a typical area of investigation, like Les Soeurs Vatard -- the prostitute, the bookbindery -- and presenting a variety of scenes and episodes: Marthe's parentage, her temperament (both established rather crudely, in what looks like an attempt to give the data that will condition her life, although subsequently they are barely mentioned); the discussion of the fabrication of false pearls (an attempt at documentation); the theatre, the maison publique, the mortuary, and so on. From En ménage onwards, although tableaux of contemporary society have an important place, they are more strictly subordinated to the psychological investigation of one central character; the naturalist 'procès-verbal' thus recedes into the background.

One of the problems of both Marthe and Les Soeurs Vatard is indeed the absence of a strongly developed figure to provide a unifying perspective on the events of the novel. In Marthe particularly the transition in tone from, say, Ginginet's verbal displays, to a caricatural account of a theatre performance, to a sentimentalised view of prostitutes, to a mildly humorous account of Léo's domestic struggles, creates a certain discontinuity, and similarly the transition

between the actual episodes in the book can be somewhat abrupt and confusing. For example, at the beginning, after the lengthy description of a performance at the Théâtre de Bobino, the curtain drops and we move brusquely forward twenty-four hours to the following night's performance; (p.17) a page later, Léo's courting of Marthe is treated in an equally accelerated manner, with the conclusion: 'bref, il parvint un soir à l'entraîner chez lui.' (p.18) But far from then treating the events of this evening 'chez lui', as we might expect, the author devotes two pages to Ginginet's drunken complaints about Marthe, which end the first chapter. The relative immediacy of these scenes is then abandoned for two chapters, in what we eventually realise is a lengthy biographical parenthesis about Marthe. In chapter four, Huysmans rather surprisingly does return to the evening when Léo takes Marthe home, although previously having given the impression it could be taken as read.

As he is dealing with three characters who are not always together, the author is forced to make various chronological switches -- with the result in one case (as Baldick has pointed out) that Léo is said to spend several days at his mother's in chapter seven (p.81), when in chapter six he returns to Paris the day after his departure. In the final chapter, Huysmans is obliged to introduce a minor character, a medical student, to provide a perspective from which his three main characters can be dismissed -- and reminds us rather belatedly that this student, who is never individualised, has appeared briefly earlier on in the book. Cogny acknowledges these problems by referring to what he calls a cinematic technique (52) -- but this cutting from one scene or perspective to another, or the

changes in tempo which allow us to catch up on missing information, give an impression of a rather clumsy patching-together of episodes, and make the novel hard to read as a story. One is also reminded of the kaleidoscopic technique favoured by the Goncourt brothers, which again frequently makes their novels irritatingly impenetrable. (53)

The final chapter of Marthe takes place in the mortuary and autopsy room of the Hôpital Lariboisière, beginning by showing the attendant cleaning down the rooms, swigging a bottle of wine and stuffing a corpse's foot back into its shroud, and ending by showing Ginginet's corpse being dissected for a lecture on alcoholism. Such a macabre scene leads Helen Trudgian to compare Marthe with Jules Janin's novel L'Ane mort ou la femme guillotinée (1829) which contains a whole series of such ghoulish scenes, (54) and she quotes Flaubert as remarking apropos of Marthe. 'Si c'est là le naturalisme, qu'est-ce que la fantaisie?' (55) Mario Praz calls L'Ane mort 'a parody of the roman-charogne,' (56) and Trudgian sees Marthe in turn as an example of such 'bas-romantisme'. One recalls Moreas's comment to Jules Huret that naturalism was 'la pourriture du romantisme.' (57) The poem 'A l'amphithéâtre', a juvenile pastiche of Baudelaire by Paul Alexis, quoted at the head of this chapter, is a good illustration of this manner. (58) In fact, much naturalist writing tends to exhibit what one might call a neo-Gothic décor: the gloomy castle is replaced by the sleazy tenement, with its ill-lit staircase and sordid rooms, whose leprous walls ooze -- or 'piss' -- with damp. These descriptions in themselves often are impressively appalling; but they occur so often that they risk degenerating

into rather clichéd stage directions or exercices de style, rather than serving as testimony to bad social conditions.

In chapter two of Marthe, the heroine and her lover land up in 'un affreux terrier situé rue du Cherche-Midi':

Cette maison avait toutes les allures d'un bouge. Porte rouilleuse, zébrée de sang de boeuf et d'ocre, long corridor obscur dont les murs suintaient des gouttes noires comme du café, escalier étrange, criant à chaque pesée de bottes, imprégné des immondes senteurs des éviers et de l'odeur des latrines dont les portes battaient à tous les vents. (...) les murs déshabillés pissaient des gouttelettes jaunes et le carreau, avec ses plaques de vernis écarlate, semblait une peau malade marbrée d'érosions rouges. (pp.28-29)

Huysmans' exhibition of the noxious odours and pustular skin of urban reality helps establish a tradition of naturalist descriptions. (59) Five years later, for instance, in Hennique's story 'Les Funérailles de Francine Cloarec' (1881), we read:

Maintenant, une puanteur d'égout, une odeur de graillon rance et de charnier encombraient la respiration, s'échappant des cabinets mal fermés, des plombs ouverts, de certaines portes, de la poussière huileuse et humide répandue. (60)

As a passing undertaker's assistant remarks, '-Cré nom, ça schlingue ferme!' (61) While in Mirbeau's Journal d'une femme de chambre, published in 1900, we read:

Dès l'entrée, l'escalier étroit et raide, avec ses marches malpropres qui collent aux semelles et sa rampe humide qui poisse aux mains, vous souffle un air empesté au visage, une odeur de plombs et de cabinets, et vous met, dans le coeur, un découragement. (62)

To comment on these descriptions is obviously not to say that such places were not common, or that authors were unjustified in recording their existence. But far from simply setting the scene, such presentations of décor tend to draw attention to themselves, either through their banality, or, more often, by the stylistic verve and luridness authors display in the attempt to avoid a conventional repetition of a familiar setting.

Description is no longer a neutral 'transcription' of reality, but a pretext for stylistic indulgence, which tends to produce a kind of comic exaggeration. Objects become larger, or grosser, than life, or even take on life, like the chair in Marthe:

un vieux fauteuil qui se rigolait seul, près de la cheminée, riant par toutes ses crevasses, tirant, comme pour les narguer, ses langues de crin noir par toutes les fentes de ses gueules de velours. (p.29)

This exploration of the world of objects, carried out with caricatural verve, is arguably one of the strongest points of Huysmans' first novels. We have seen, to conclude this discussion of Marthe, that his theoretical adherence to the public or pseudo-scientific areas of naturalism was always somewhat half-hearted; for Huysmans naturalism primarily meant modernism in subject matter and the desire to use language as a plastic medium. Consequently, Marthe only sketches in rather cursorily the deterministic notions of heredity and environment, while as a 'procès-verbal' on urban squalor it is fragmentary in its approach, and its 'documentation' may seem either clumsily contrived (the false pearls) or even nearer horror romanticism than realism (the last chapter). Moreover, however blatant its title may appear, as an account of prostitution it is distinctly uncontroversial: while Edmond de Goncourt pleads at least for a more humane penal system, Zola explores the ramifications of political and sexual corruption on a grandiose scale, and Victor Margueritte spells out the horrors of venereal disease and bourgeois turpitude, Huysmans on the other hand, abandons his heroine and shows his hero thankfully returning to the stultifying comforts of the bourgeoisie.

Apart from occasional melodramatic flourishes, it is not easy to detect any humanitarian intention in Marthe. The sort of 'grossissement' given to the armchair in Marthe is also applied to people in Huysmans' works, producing gleeful caricatural distortion, particularly in the case of secondary figures whose inner life is of little importance to the plot. Thus in chapter one of Marthe we are shown 'une actrice énorme dont le nez marinait dans un lac de graisse' and hear 'la tirade éjaculée par la bonde de cette cuve humaine.' (p.15) Certain details -- usually repulsive -- are seized and magnified out of proportion: the actress's enormity is a pretext for the 'lac de graisse'. Caricature may seem to be a way of giving a rapid and memorable description of a person's appearance; but it seems truer to say that the strongest impression we receive is less of the character than of the author's verbal or comic inventiveness.

In some of Léon Bloy's Histoires désobligeantes, this technique is taken to bizarre extremes:

Par le visage, elle ressemblait à une pomme de terre frite roulée dans de la raclure de fromage. Ses mains donnaient à penser qu'elle avait 'déterré sa bisafeuille', comme dit un proverbe scandinave. (63)

One may struggle to picture the appearance of someone who resembles a fried potato for a while, but the elaborate reference to a presumably apocryphal proverb which adds a touch of gratuitous absurdity indicates that Bloy, a professed adversary of naturalism, is parodying this mannerism of the genre with hilarious virtuosity. In 'Le Vieux de la maison', the old man in question

ressemblait à une vieille mouche qui n'aurait pas la force de voler sur les excréments et dont les araignées elles-mêmes ne voudraient plus. (64)

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In fact, taken to this extreme, writing of this kind is almost

the opposite of 'naturalistic': it obtrudes itself between us and the world it is allegedly representing, commenting not on reality but a literary technique. (65) As was briefly noted at the end of the last chapter, contemporary critics had already observed this opacity which is a potential tendency of naturalist writing, and seen it as being allied to a fundamental indifference towards the suffering humanity which is the alleged subject of so many naturalist novels. (66)

In Huysmans, caricature certainly forms part of what Valéry called 'l'épopée de l'aventure stylistique.' (67) In the less wilfully exaggerated manner Huysmans uses it can also be integrated into what could be called a dehumanised perspective on the world. If objects move towards animation (like the armchair), people are deprived of their human qualities, moving towards an animal or even inanimate condition: the actress becomes a 'cuve humaine'. (68) This is particularly apparent if we turn to Les Soeurs Vatard. In his second novel, which is twice the length of Marthe and generally more substantial, the author lingers over infections or bodily functions with an insistence that makes virtually every character seem to be deformed or diseased. Dropsy has reduced Mme Vatard to a mindless, bloated cripple; her younger daughter Désirée's charms are marred by a squint; in the atelier, one woman is wracked with toothache, another infested with fleas, while the forewoman has a bad eye and all the women give off 'une senteur forte de chèvres qui auraient gigoté au soleil.' (p.14) Huysmans is fond of giving a sort of Gargantuan magnitude to the less attractive bodily functions: thus 'Une fille se moucha, sonnante comme d'une trompette;' (pp. 270) another is seen 'torchant l'éternelle gouttière de son nez;' (p.30) Teston's flatulence

terrifies the cat with its vigour. The immediate impression given by this approach is of a combination of gross humour and a fanciful, inverted preciousness -- when Huysmans writes, for instance:

Désirée, que toutes ses disputes n'intéressaient guère, se grattait la jambe sur laquelle folâtrait une puce. (p.172)

The image of the flea desporting itself verges on parody; one thinks of Hennique's burlesque story, 'Benjamin Rozes', about a lawyer infected with a tapeworm (an alternative title was 'Un drôle de compagnon'), or of Huysmans' own prose poem in Croquis parisiens, which celebrates the diverse aromas of female armpits in extended detail ('Le Gousset'). But cumulatively, this manner tends to degenerate into a rather gratuitous vulgarity: if a cat appears, it is inevitably on heat, or devouring its fleas; when a dog is seen in a restaurant, it does not fail to cock its leg against a table, and so on.

Within the context of this somewhat brutalised physiological presentation of his characters, Huysmans does however try to develop a moral or psychological perspective. The action of Les Soeurs Vataud is mainly based on the amorous adventures of the eponymous heroines, Céline and Désirée, and a certain effort is made to describe their emotional life and aspirations. While Zola's characters tend to be troubled by uncontrollable instincts (such as the bloodlust of the hero of La Bête humaine), people in Huysmans' novels, like those in the Goncourts', are much more the prey of their nerves. (69) Both Céline and Désirée suffer from the nervous exhaustion and lassitude that afflict all Huysmans' heroes, where the physical and moral are intimately linked. (70) In fact, in his skilful analysis in En ménage of what he called 'la crise juponnière', the author indicates the dubiousness of

any polarisation of body and soul. In Les Soeurs Vatard, however, perhaps because he felt ill at ease dealing with relatively unsophisticated characters, physiology tends to get the better of psychology; emotional experiences are seen in a simplistic way, or diminished by the debunking effect of the author's coarse presentation of the physical aspects of characters. Thus grief is expressed in much the same way as blowing one's nose was ('elle pleurait avec un bruit d'écluse' p.48) and when Céline is abandoned by a lover:

Le coeur gros et les yeux pleins, elle geignit longuement, puis elle dina chez une camarade et s'offrit une telle indigestion de beignets que, ne pouvant arrêter le bal de son estomac, elle l'accompagna, en musique, de hoquets et de points d'orgue. (p.51)

The jocular tone which describes these musical variations on indigestion suggests we are not meant to take Céline's feelings too seriously: the stomach rules her emotions, so that when we see the phrase 'Quand son coeur eut terminé ses gambades,' (p.52) we no longer know whether Huysmans is referring to indigestion or love, her heart-ache or her heart-burn. When he describes the sexual mores of the brocheuses, the brutality of their liaisons is partly attributed to instinctive urges ('elle écouta les révélations de sa chair' p.48); puberty drives Céline to men like a bitch on heat -- she is a 'grande mâtime', wracked by boiling blood and mounting desires. (71) But as with heredity in Marthe, Huysmans pays little more than passing attention to this zoological vocabulary.

What the book does reveal more consistently is a certain hostility towards the characters. The artist Cyprien, the only intellectual to appear, treats Céline like a child, animal or idiot, with a mixture of irritation and indulgence; and one

really feels that Huysmans' attitude towards his working-class characters is very similar (or at least the narrative tone he adopts is). In chapter four, (72) Auguste is seen timidly agonising about Désirée, and after a muted flirtation, finally fails to accost her: but the humorous warmth of this observation of human feelings is dispelled by the final sentence of the chapter, which offers a caricatural impression of the object of his affection asleep:

enfouissant son blanc museau dans le traversin, elle ronflotta gentiment, la bouche mal ouverte et le nez chantant. (p.76)

Moments when people might be seen with dignity or sympathy are sometimes curiously devalued, as though the author were determined to debase his characters. At the end of chapter eight, the couple's modest kisses are derided by prostitutes; sex is reduced to the most brutal mercenary level -- and in fact the book shows how affection is finally eroded by petty, but more dominant, financial concerns. Appropriately enough, chapter eight ends with Auguste sourly wishing Désirée had paid for her share of the evening's entertainment. J.-P. Vilcot has pointed out the virulence of Huysmans' attitude towards his characters in Les Soeurs Vataud, to the extent of comparing him with Hieronymus Bosch. He also remarks how far this manner is from Zola's tenderness for his popular characters or the latter's implied concern about social injustice. (73)

Unsurprisingly, the secondary characters in Les Soeurs Vataud are often presented in a brief sketch which draws simultaneous attention to their repellent physical and moral qualities. Describing one of Céline's lovers, the author refers to 'un gringalet chauve qui avait une joufflure d'ange et des regards

noyés d'ivrogne,' (p.48) or 'sa frimousse édentée d'arsouille.' (p.54)

Her lovers seem to be specimens from a common mould, and their qualities are limited to certain typifying traits (drunkard, villain, womaniser), sometimes depicted in a language based on popular cliché:

Corrompu jusqu'aux moelles, mauvais comme une teigne, hargneux comme un cocher, il n'avait aucun égard pour les femmes. (p.50)

Use of familiar or popular language in narrative passages is very common in Les Soeurs Vatard, and produced the following complaint from Flaubert:

Quand c'est l'auteur qui parle, pourquoi parlez-vous comme vos personnages? Notez que vous affaiblissez par là l'idiome de vos personnages. Que je ne comprenne pas une locution employée par un voyou parisien, il n'y a pas de mal. (...) Mais quand l'écrivain emploie, par lui-même, un tas de mots qui ne sont dans aucun dictionnaire, alors j'ai le droit de me révolter contre lui. (...) Pourquoi dire des frusques, au lieu de hardes ou habits? (74)

The most obvious source of inspiration for this technique is of course Zola, to whom the novel is dedicated. But Vilcot's comments already indicate the limits of such an analogy.

J. Dubois has outlined the effect produced by the intrusion of popular speech into the narrative of L'Assommoir, published two years before Les Soeurs Vatard. It goes beyond picturesqueness to reflect the mentality of the milieu the novel describes. The narrative voice expresses a sort of complicity with the characters, who through the medium of style indirect libre express themselves inside the narration as well as in the dialogue.

Il y a, dans L'Assommoir, ce phénomène si remarquable de mimétisme entraînant le narrateur à emprunter la manière de discourir des personnages, avec langue peuple et forme de l'indirect libre, ou encore à céder la place à une sorte de voix collective, semblant de chœur populaire, qui relate et commente l'événement, de façon volontiers diffuse et cancanière. (75)

Thus, to give a simple example quoted by Cressot, the narrator's words fuse with the characters': 'La société riait, se tordait. Cet animal de Mes Bottes était allumé.' (76) At times, the combination of popular vocabulary with a refined literary syntax produces a discordant note -- Vissière has pointed out that Zola also uses many 'fin-de-siècle' mannerisms in L'Assommoir. (77)

To return to Les Soeurs Vatard, it is not difficult to find examples of, say, free indirect speech, which might suggest the desire to achieve a similar effect to Zola, although often enough they are simply an elliptical report of speech: '-- Désirée avait des frissons dans le dos, brrou! ça devait être froid...' (p.89) Huysmans also uses many non-literary synonyms, which might perhaps be seen as reflections of a character's language: 'La voisine opinait de la hure;' (p.98) 'il faudrait encore retourner chez le quenottier.' (p.99) Most striking of all is the frequent occurrence of what sound like popular catchphrases and similes: 'Tendre comme un moineau et soûlard comme une grive, c'était un compère...' (p.58); Désirée is 'propre comme un petit sou.' (p.67) (78) At the same time, we find a jovial brutality in the descriptions of the coarser aspects of the brocheuses' life, which might suggest a humorous resignation: 'Sa brouille avec Eugène n'était pas survenue d'ailleurs, sans une caresse prolongée de poings...' (p.52)

But it is difficult to reconcile these various stylistic devices, which seem to be part of a sort of sympathetic movement towards the world of the brocheuses, with the very evident antipathy the voice which narrates Les Soeurs Vatard reveals towards them. Apart from the debasing insistence on physical ugliness already discussed, there are many directly dismissive or contemptuous comments on the characters' opinions or behaviour throughout the

book. We might recall Huysmans' remark in an undated letter to E. Montrosier (for he was himself, of course, the part-owner of a bookbindery, inherited from his stepfather):

je vais passer une agréable soirée à discuter avec des vauriennes à propos de 2 sous - heureusement que je les ai traitées plus que cavalièrement dans mon livre. Quand j'ai trop d'ennui avec elles, je songe à la boue dans laquelle je les ai traînées et ça me console! (79)

The narrator constantly dissociates himself from the characters, either by direct comment (a joke is 'inept', p.7), sarcasm (a banal remark is 'cette idée très neuve', p.44), or by showing their behaviour in an ironical, or simply ludicrous, context. In chapter two (section two), an evening with the Testons produces a conversation larded with popular bêtises (for example, a discussion about whether one can cure an infected finger by sticking it up a frog's anus), which both reveal the limitations of the characters and are also amusing at their expense.

Elsewhere, however, one sometimes begins to feel that the voice telling the story belongs to a sour misanthrope and that the characters are less stupid than he perhaps implies. In chapter eight, when Auguste and Désirée go to a performance at Bobino (not the theatre seen in Marthe, but the one which still exists in the rue de la Gaîté), the scene is presented with the customary caricatural verve. As in Marthe, the singer is not simply bad but seen to be accomplishing a ritual which has little to do with music: she is 'une femme gigotant des bras et beuglant dans un enragé vacarme,' (p.137) and, the author observes, 'une sorte de fumée noire flottait dans le ravin entrevu sous son aisselle.' (p.139) The admiration shown by Désirée, mentioned after this presentation, thus has to be seen in heavily ironical terms. A better example of the way simple pleasures are placed

in what seems an unnecessarily sour context occurs in chapter fourteen, when Céline and Désirée, obliged to spend Sunday at home, enviously watch trippers setting off on the trains to Versailles (their building looks on to the railway lines from Montparnasse). We might share their feelings -- but the narrator launches into a particularly acid attack on the fatuousness of picnicking expeditions, (pp.235-36) which sounds more like bad temper than anything else. Interestingly enough, his tone changes completely two pages later on, when there is an affectionately detailed description of the locomotives in the station, and the sisters' personification of their favourite engine is continued by the narrator.

All these examples combine to suggest, in fact, that there is an ambivalence or incoherence in the narrative perspective of Les Soeurs Vatar. On the one hand, working-class people are dehumanised; we recall Huysmans' desire for revenge as the capitalist irked by the tiresome demands of his employees. Yet at the same time, objects, the phenomena of the material world, are evoked with loving detail; the sourness with which people are seen gives way to what seems to be a fascinated urge to record the world they live in as faithfully as possible. (80) But in the area which Huysmans has chosen to investigate, popular culture (language, morality, entertainment, etc.) obviously plays an important part; consequently, he duly records some of its manifestations, using the linguistic devices discussed above to give a sort of authenticity to his presentation. Thus at Bobino, we have touches of style indirect libre ('Comme prix c'était cher, par exemple...', p.137), or throughout the book several examples of the popular songs whose 'poetry' is discussed

by Désirée and Auguste in chapter six. (pp.110-11) However, since popular culture is inseparable from people, it seems almost that Huysmans cannot resist the revulsion they inspire in him, and his adoption of the characters' language is overwhelmed by the tone of sardonic satire which produces a rather distorted view of humanity.

Significantly, Flaubert complained to Huysmans that Les Soeurs Vataud lacked a unified perspective and considered that his use of 'les expressions canailles', far from being a psychological or documentary innovation, was simply '(de) la rhétorique retournée.' (81) Rhetoric or stylistic flamboyance begins to assume the same importance as the creation of a world. (82) If Flaubert criticises Huysmans, it is not for paying attention to language at the expense of reality, but for taking up unthinkingly the ready-made formulas and mannerisms which now strike us as typical of the minor naturalist novel. Huysmans' preference for describing objects rather than people, or more accurately, his preference for description as opposed to action or psychological investigation in Les Soeurs Vataud, and also in Marthe and En ménage, is of course a typical feature of the realist and naturalist text: the emphasis shifts from man (who thinks and acts) to the world, and man is seen largely as a function of the world. In a well-known article on 'L'Effet de réel', Roland Barthes announced that description in the nineteenth-century novel was intended to create a referential plenitude; objects are described to create an 'effet de réel', to convey the illusion of an absolute authenticity. (83) But at the same time, Barthes also noted that for, say, Flaubert rhetoric or the manipulation of language was as important as the realist

imperative. (84) These two tendencies (towards realism or writing and rhetoric) are also observed by Bersani in Flaubert's work. In certain descriptions in Madame Bovary, things 'simply are there': (85) but at the same time, the static nature of his plots, the passivity of his heroes

all create situations of little dramatic pressure, situations in which stylistic virtuosity seems almost necessary to sustain the narrative. A poverty of event and of psychological interest provides occasions in which language justifies Flaubert's distrust of language by demonstrating its independence from the life which fiction presumably reflects. (86)

In L'Éducation sentimentale, Bersani argues, the only affirmation is description; its main events are its 'polished, excessively written descriptions.' (87)

These points should be borne in mind when one analyses the relations between character, narrative perspective and description in a novel like Les Soeurs Vatard. Like Marthe, the novel has no central character strong enough to serve as a focal point for the action, and is fairly crude in its attempts at psychological exploration. At the same time there is a certain aimlessness in the plot, and an abundance of descriptive writing barely related to any character (beyond the recording eye of the narrator). Not only do such features make the book hard to read, but also, as Hennequin remarked, there is a discrepancy between the shallow characters and their richly described surroundings:

Visiblement, M. Huysmans ne trouvait pas à loger dans ces âmes étroites, tout l'épanouissement de ses qualités de peintre verbal. Il se mit à l'aise dans En Menage et eut recours aux artistes. (88)

One should perhaps beware of trying to justify description simply as a function of characterisation. Professor C.A. Burns,

for instance, remarks, apropos of Céard's novel Une belle journée:

la description n'est pas gratuite dans Une belle journée: elle crée l'atmosphère essentielle pour comprendre ce qui se passe dans le coeur d'Ernestine Duhamain. (89)

But the notion that description must somehow be motivated by being subordinated to the perspective of a particular character, or otherwise becomes 'gratuitous', is probably not sufficient to explain the sheer amount of space given up to the presentation of objects and landscapes in naturalist writing. Talking of the rainstorm in part three of Une belle journée, Burns continues:

La pluie symbolise par sa continuité, par sa liquidité, la dissolution absolue des rêves de l'héroïne et le caractère informe de la vie des hommes. (90)

Although this interpretation is perhaps that which Céard invites us to make, on another level, one might say that, like the world, the rain is simply 'there'. Its presence has an important function in the plot, since it forces Mme Duhamain to stay with Trudon in the restaurant -- and this entrapment perhaps suggests the existential clausturation which the conclusion of the novel points to. At the same time it provides part of the irony in the title Une belle journée, since the day is a failure climatically as well as in other respects; besides, the long description devoted to the rain is also a delaying tactic in this book 'about nothing' -- a way of emphasising the monotony and ordinariness of events by the sheer space it takes up.

But if one looks at such a piece of description in a wider context, one wonders if such attempts to recuperate naturalist setpieces exclusively in terms of symbol, theme, character are not inadequate. It seems hard to attribute any symbolic value to the torrential downpour described with magnificent gusto in chapter two (section two) of Les Soeurs Vatard.

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for instance. (91) If one of the tendencies of naturalism is to displace the individual from the centre of the work by emphasising environment, documentation and so on, it seems no more logical to expect description to function in terms of character than, say, to reduce character to the role of figures in a landscape. A title like Croquis parisiens indicates that notions such as 'l'effet de réel', literary impressionism or the plastic powers of language might be potentially more fruitful.

Nevertheless, the reader undoubtedly feels more at ease in Huysmans' third novel En ménage, where a dominant central character, André Jayant, adds a sort of directing human presence absent in Les Soeurs Vataud. Zola proclaimed his dislike of the purely fictional, storytelling aspects of the novel, (92) although the murders, rapes and other violent incidents which enliven works such as Germinal, La Terre or La Bête humaine might cast doubt on the rigour of his opinions in practice. (93) Huysmans, however, is much more severe in his refusal of any sort of intrigue going beyond the mundane everyday. His setpieces in Les Soeurs Vataud are based not on action but description: thus while Zola presents Gervaise's fight with and bare-bottomed beating of Virginie in spectacular detail in chapter one of L'Assommoir, Auguste's fight with a fellow-worker takes place off-stage and is presented in a very low-key way. The first chapter of Les Soeurs Vataud demonstrates the lack of movement and event which is typical of the novel.

The opening chapter describes an overnight session in the bindery, from two in the morning till nine o'clock. Marking out of the hours and unrequited pleas for silence by the forewoman recur throughout the chapter. But despite Huysmans' chronological

precision, there is no real movement in terms of event: most of what he describes could occur at any time during the night. The announcement that five hours have passed after the first four pages is not matched by any attempt to suggest this passage of time in those pages. In an interesting article entitled 'Quelques remarques sur la temporalité dans le roman naturaliste', Françoise Gaillard says the opening sentence of Les Soeurs Vatard ('Deux heures du matin sonnèrent') 'n'a pas de nécessité dramatique' and gives no real 'information romanesque'; the 'marquage temporel a pour fonction de produire un simple "effet de réel".' (94) It is a gesture towards the external reality the fiction pretends to represent. Evidently, one can see that these precisions of time do give us certain information; they act as stage directions (it is night), and also remind us we are meant to be reading a novel, which recounts a sequence of events, and not, say, another prose poem extracted from the Croquis parisiens ('L'Atelier de brochage'). In the opening passage of En ménage, midnight strikes: in a similar way, the scene is set for a 'Paris by night' tableau (which includes the effect produced by two clocks striking out of time); but the striking of the half-hour a few pages on, introducing a framework of temporal movement irrelevant to a 'croquis' (as it is literally to a genuine sketch), yet which Huysmans accepts as a necessary part of a novel, is at least matched by the movement of the characters walking home through the streets.

In Les Soeurs Vatard, however, this temporal framework really fails to correspond to the text. The real movement of the first chapter is not temporal, but spatial and sensual: essentially it consists of a selection of impressions of the

atelier, blending people, noises, smells, objects and gestures. The word tableau or analogies with the pictorial arts may be inadequate to suggest the ambition and scope of such descriptive passages. Certainly we might well imagine the writer, notebook in hand, attempting to transcribe a scene of which he is the observer (the proliferation of details surely results from a sharpness of vision and observation akin to a painter's), (95) but on the other hand, the written word evokes sensual impressions only indirectly hinted at in a painting (smell, touch, movement), whatever other differences there may be between the two media. (96) Hatzfeld, who considered this verbal impressionism to be naturalism's greatest achievement, (97) remarks of a description by Loti that it gives 'tactile and olfactory details (...) which a painter could never render.' (98) The best descriptive passages of Les Soeurs Vataud, En ménage, or other works, suggest a lush, material density difficult to convey except by extensive quotation from the text.

Whatever their brilliance, however, the first chapter of Les Soeurs Vataud shows how they may endanger the narrative structure of the novel they appear in. Although Céline and Désirée appear on the first page, they are only introduced as the Vataud sisters, and thus presumably as the heroines of the book, in the second chapter. The opening pages do not present any dominant individual consciousness; there is no character for the reader to grasp to help him through the flux of descriptive details, such as, for example, the outsider-figure being initiated into a new milieu sometimes used by Zola (Florent in Le Ventre de Paris, Étienne in Germinal). However caustic Huysmans' narrative voice may be, the narrator never takes on any personality, to emerge,

say, like the reporting figure in Les Foules de Lourdes (written in the first person). Consequently, just as laughter and other noises are presented as cut off from any identifiable human source ('Dans un coin, un rire aigu sautilla...', p.8), so the chapter as a whole avoids any human perspective, any sense that some individual is experiencing in a here-and-now what is being described. (99) The action of paying the brocheuses, for example, comes across not so much as a specific incident, but as an instance chosen at random of continually occurring events, arguments, grievances etc.

Despite this lack of focus, there is nothing neutral about the depiction of the atelier. Dawn breaks with a 'blancheur sinistre', (p.13) revealing a heap of skirts beneath which exhausted human limbs barely move; the women are 'blêmes comme des têtes de veau;' (p.12) the atelier is compared to a morgue. No thought or feeling emerges from the women; even the most external physical manifestations of consciousness may be cut off from the individual. But if people become objects in a macabre tableau, objects, sounds, light are shown with an intensity that virtually animates them. Chairs lie on their flanks or backs, their guts escaping through their bellies; the sun is personified -- 'le soleil se décidait à mûrir,' (p.14) -- and the chapter ends in a crescendo of light as the sun's rays move across the room, finally bursting in a 'golden shower' on piles of glaring white paper. Buisine (100) interprets this concluding 'epiphany' as a symbol of the alchemical power of literature to transfigure reality: out of the rotten stench of the atelier emerges the Book -- the pristine sheets of paper. The sordid reality of the bookbindery is transmuted into a piece

of fine writing -- to which plot, character and narrative perspective tend to be sacrificed, one might add.

Les Socurs Vatard begins with a dawn and ends with a dusk, suggesting, according to Gaillard, a definite idea of degradation or dying: 'Le temps a tourné et a inscrit sur les choses la marque symbolique de l'usure.' (101) Apart from a few indications about the weather and seasons, time plays a muted, negative part in the novel. Mediocrity and abandonment of aspirations seem to be the conditioning forces of existence -- Désirée and Auguste make do with other marriage partners instead of each other, Céline returns to her working-class lover who beats and exploits her. There is little idea that age or experience either adds to or takes something away from life: the dawn and dusk might enclose one day rather than the months they presumably embrace, for the little change we see in the characters. The novel seems deliberately static and lacking in dramatic interest. A few events are prolonged with considerable skill. More than half the book is devoted to the account of Céline's relations with Cyprien, and Désirée's with Auguste. Between chapters eleven and nineteen, there is an alternating account of these two affairs, although seven of these nine chapters (XIII to XIX) deal with the gradual deterioration of these relationships. After Auguste fails to seduce Désirée in the hotel room in chapter fourteen and thus to establish a sexual bond strong enough to commit them to resisting Vatar'd's opposition to their marriage, apathy and the inconvenience of their meetings get the better of their affection; in chapter eighteen they both agree to marry other people.

The relative rapidity of this symmetrical outcome in one chapter seems imbalanced compared with the length devoted to the

collapse of their affair. From a psychological point of view, on the other hand, this speed demonstrates a sardonic truth about human relations as seen by Huysmans: both Désirée and Auguste are more interested in domestic bliss than true love, and so replace each other with few qualms. But it seems odd that in chapter seventeen Huysmans should devote several pages to analysing Auguste's reactions when for the first time Désirée fails to come to a rendezvous, while in the next chapter he is married off to a woman we have barely heard of. Though we may be tempted to read Désirée's banal domestic ambitions ironically, (p.56) in fact her dream of creating an independent interior reflects, on a humbler financial scale, the aspirations of André, Folantin or even des Esseintes. En ménage and A vau-l'eau present such domestic struggles on an epic scale -- and show how little place love has in Huysmans' fictional world. The message inherent in Désirée's and Auguste's separate marriages is further affirmed by the reappearance of the soldier's sweetheart from chapter twelve in chapter eighteen (section two): she too has abandoned her lover, removed by the demands of military service. This comment on the fickleness of love again seems rather contrived.

Both décor and structure in Les Soeurs Vataud, then, reflect a fundamental pessimism. Similarly, the monotony of the plot is an intentional part of the naturalist ideology, as Gaillard observes:

Inutile pour le roman naturaliste de sacrifier à la grossière intrusion de l'ordre moral à la fin de son récit. La conformité aux valeurs idéologiques se fait par la banalisation du récit qui est un effacement angoissé du temps historique. (102)

Time as a positive, objective force, suggesting dynamic progress through history, is alien to the naturalist novel, as the previous

chapter suggested. What we are given, on the contrary, is either a sense of the eternal biological cycles that define existence, (103) or, as far as individuals are concerned, a subjective impression of 'la durée, l'épaisseur du temps.' (104) Dubois remarks that post-Balzacian novelists

concentrent moins l'intérêt du lecteur sur les faits d'un conflit que sur les périodes d'une durée. (105)

Tedium and stagnation may be the result:

La progression narrative doit traverser lentement ces séquences de la vie quotidienne et elle risque parfois de s'y engluer. (106)

Consequently, one sees better why Huysmans held L'Éducation sentimentale up as a model of the naturalist novel: he writes to Hennequin

la composition au fil d'eau dans l'Éducation sentimentale me semble admirable, car elle rend le train-train de la vie, l'authentique décousu des faits... (107)

But while L'Éducation sentimentale incorporates and intertwines personal and historical perspectives -- even if both personal and political action are ultimately derided and devalued -- (108) a more typical naturalist novel like Une belle journée stands outside history altogether, and deliberately tries to create a sort of stasis. (109) By basing his novel on a non-event (Mme Duhamain's failure to commit adultery with Trudon), Céard makes the whole structure of his book reaffirm his heroine's final mournful realisation:

Elle comprit que la misère des coeurs résulte, non pas de la douleur continue qui les poigne, mais de l'effort qu'ils font pour échapper à leur condition. (110)

To recapitulate the discussion of Les Soeurs Vatar so far, one begins to see how the book's various components quite readily form a model of the typical naturalist novel, if the schema of

public statement, philosophy and mode of writing is applied. In its subject matter, it corresponds to the notion of the 'procès-verbal' based on an area of life outside the experience of the normal middle-class reader. Huysmans' penchant for the grosser aspects of the brocheuses' existence may only suggest a rather facile vulgarity nowadays, but the indignation voiced by a contemporary reviewer like Boissin (111) indicates that a hundred years ago at least the novel had successfully broached certain taboos. But the book's outlook on mankind is essentially debasing: psychology gives way to physiology, exploration of individual consciousnesses to caricature of more generalised types; presentation of milieu becomes as important as characterisation, and, as far as writing is concerned, description, or rather the act of describing and capturing impressions of the world, becomes as important as creating action in the world. If one regards Les Soeurs Vatard somewhat critically, however, it is really not because it reduces the thinking subject to a set of physiological impulses and impressions in a colourful urban environment, (112) but because essentially it rings false as a study of working-class life (the author all too obviously feels uncomfortable with his subjects) and because its refusal of event makes it extremely difficult to read. Les Soeurs Vatard lacks both the human sympathy and the dramatic interest of a novel like L'Assommoir.

Whatever these limitations, however, thanks to its documentary authenticity a novel like Les Soeurs Vatard remains a century after its publication highly informative from a sociological point of view. For F.W.J. Hemmings, the book is 'a mine of

information about the way of life of the Paris wage-earners in the early years of the Third Republic.' (113) The very details which contemporary critics like Brunetiere or Barbey d'Aurevilly (114) denounced as gratuitous in naturalist novels now serve to recapture for the modern reader a society which has disappeared into the pages of history books. Apart from the picturesque charm of the street scenes or other setpieces, Les Soeurs Vataud also contains various attempts at social analysis. There is of course the account of the bindery and those who work there. Huysmans was himself the reluctant part-owner of a bindery, and however brutal the description of the brocheuses, we can point out in fairness that their fictional employer is shown to know very little about his business and to be bamboozled by his foreman. (p.220) In another domain, comments on military service show how seriously it impedes the conscript's chance of finding skilled work after five years in the army. Two examples worth considering in more detail, as they are closely linked to the behaviour of the main characters, are money and social class.

Though we may recall Durtal's half-fanciful, half-serious musings on the diabolical mystery and destructive effect of money and capital in chapter one of La-bas, in the works up to A rebours money is most significant by its absence. The cycle of misery which encloses Monsieur Polantin in A vau-l'eau seems in part due to the restrictions imposed by genteel poverty (bad food, uncomfortable lodgings, etc.). Désirée's marital aspirations seem almost entirely dependent on a certain minimal weekly income: with a Micawber-like realism, her father demonstrates Auguste's inability to reach this level and the misery ensuing from the deficit. Finally Désirée marries a foreman with

sufficient income. Day-to-day happiness depends on cash; throughout Les Soeurs Vatard, necessities and pleasures are priced -- the daily wage of a brocheuse, the cost of a meal, a music-hall, silk stockings. As the characters' basic wants are supplied, they are free to cost out their frugal luxuries. Poverty and riches appear only fleetingly -- beggars glimpsed in the street, an expensive shop window.

The average wage of the women in the bindery is twelve to fifteen francs a week (chapter four); Auguste earns 4 francs 80 a day (chapter seventeen), though a good worker can earn twice as much; the artist Cyprien Tibaille has a private income of 300 francs a month -- five times that of the brocheuses (chapter nine); silk stockings can cost up to thirty, or even sixty, francs a pair (chapter nine). In En ménage, André, who also has a limited private income, pays 1000 francs in annual rent, and twenty francs to the high-class tart Blanche he visits. Such simple financial data already suggest a gulf between social classes. André or Cyprien may feel themselves to be déclassés, complain of poverty, or be regarded as deplorable Bohemians by respectable bourgeois like Désableau in En ménage. But from the point of view of Céline or her peers, Cyprien, with his stovepipe-hat, kid boots, manicured nails and loaded stick, is a member of a higher and wealthier class: the bourgeois, whose relations with Céline eventually degenerate into covert warfare.

According to J. Sanger, in an interesting article on class and language in Les Soeurs Vatard, their relationship demonstrates 'l'union impossible d'un artiste de provenance bourgeoise et d'une ouvrière;' (115) they are separated by an unbreakable barrier of language and behaviour. The silence with which Cyprien responds

to her rages and pleas shows a failure of communication on either social or emotional level; the beatings of her working-class lover to whom she returns are at least a mark of a more positive attachment, Sanger suggests. Certainly Huysmans demonstrates at length, with amusing skill, how the slightest actions of one person in close contact with another can be infuriating, and vice versa, without any intentional malice on the part of either. Cyprien is irritated by Céline's naïve views on art, her vulgarity, her malapropisms, by a large number of the manifestations of her personality in fact. In turn he appears boorish and patronising. He seems to want a free model, with attendant conveniences, rather than an individual to whose character he might have to adjust his own. Although social differences are the outer manifestations of this discord and Céline takes 'revenge' by returning to her class, (116) Huysmans' deeper probing of this problem in En ménage reveals behind this incompatibility a more fundamental, almost biological conflict.

While Huysmans' first three novels can be readily fitted into a pattern of naturalism, in terms of content, form and outlook, this is much less obviously the case with Maupassant, who never accepted Zola's banner. (117) But one thing they do have in common is a deep-rooted misogyny. This is of course hardly an exceptional quality among nineteenth-century writers. Baudelaire's 'La jeune fille épouvantail, monstre, assassin de l'art' (118) is taken up by all those who practised 'le sacerdoce littéraire' -- the Goncourts, Flaubert, Huysmans and Maupassant. (119) Man and woman are irreconcilable: Maupassant's story 'La Bûche' recounts how the woman jealously tries to destroy the real and lasting bond between two men. (120) But although Maupassant apparently

professed the belief that women were chameleon-like creatures, their position entirely defined by the intellectual capacity and social class of their husband, (121) a certain caution needs to be exercised in defining his misogyny. In Bel-Ami, for instance, it is surely Georges Duroy who is the chameleon, his increasing social success marked out by the series of women he exploits; Madeleine Forestier is both more gifted and more honourable. (122) Maupassant's contempt in fact is directed less towards women as individuals than towards women's biological role, the function of reproduction. Thus in 'L'Inutile Beauté', a jealous husband strives to disfigure his wife by making sure she is permanently pregnant; in 'Une famille', the narrator brutally sums up the wife of his friend:

C'était une mère, enfin, une grosse mère banale, la pondeuse, la poulinière humaine, la machine de chair qui procrée sans autre préoccupation dans l'âme que ses enfants et son livre de cuisine. (123)

Behind this scorn for reproduction, one sees a nihilistic refusal of fecundity, of nature and life itself; one thinks of Baudelaire's dictum 'la femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable,' or, in Huysmans, the terrifying nightmare and gruesome pleas for large-scale abortion in A rebours.

This negative attitude towards women, which covers physical and moral, social and biological spheres, does not however preclude attraction towards or need for women. (124) Biographically, we recall Maupassant the sexual athlete or Huysmans' salacious letters to Hannon and Prins. In Huysmans' work, En ménage is the fullest account of the struggle to come to terms with the contradictions imposed by these unenviable attitudes. Translated into English as Living together. (125) the book deals with the various

solutions to their sexual and domestic problems discovered by André and the other characters. Thus we see a selection of ménages, working more or less successfully: the married couple (André and Berthe); the bourgeois family (Désableau); the bachelor looked after by a housekeeper (André and Mélanie); the bachelor looked after by a housekeeper who also sleeps with him (Cyprien and Mélie) -- sardonically proposed as the 'ideal' solution; the bachelor who installs a concubine (André and Jeanne); the bachelor who frequents prostitutes, finally establishing a semi-permanent relationship with a more refined professionnelle (André and Blanche). (126)

Whereas Marthe and Les Soeurs Vatard conform more or less to the 'procès-verbal' on a given area of modern life advocated by Zola, (127) and show the difficulties Huysmans experienced in finding a narrative tone or structure which could deal coherently or convincingly with this sort of writing, En ménage is centred on the inner and outer life of the writer André Jayant. This creation of a more complex hero may seem to indicate a move away from naturalism; and in fact, as the last chapter noted, in his letters even before the publication of Les Soeurs Vatard, Huysmans begins to express a preference for the term 'intimisme'. (128) In En ménage he begins to subordinate the commonplaces of naturalist writing of his earlier novels to a more fully personal form of fictional creation. If Les Soeurs Vatard is very much an imitation or adaptation of the rhetoric of naturalism, En ménage is a sort of initial version of A rebours in the naturalist manner.

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André Jayant is the first of the fully developed characters who appear in all the subsequent novels and were dubbed by Huysmans himself to be authorial avatars in his autobiographical essay of

1885. (129) Robert Baldick does not hesitate to present both André and Cyprien as projections of the author's personality and to quote their schoolday reminiscences in chapter three as an illustration of Huysmans' own childhood; and André's affair with Jeanne is said to have been modelled on the author's relationship with Anna Meunier. (130) Even if we take the novel on its own terms, however, it has a personal ring. André admittedly appears as a weak, mediocre character, who can come to terms successfully with neither art nor life; but his thoughts and deeds are presented with a wry sympathy, and there are frequent passages of internal monologue where his and the narrator's perspective are hardly separable. Significantly, the central characters, including Berthe and Jeanne, are nearly always spared the caricatural disfigurement which mars Les Soeurs Vatard. If, in his aesthetic speculations and domestic woes, André prefigures his successors des Esseintes and Monsieur Folantin respectively, nevertheless the satirising distance with which these characters are treated is hardly ever found in En ménage. Just as Les Soeurs Vatard in some ways exists under the shadow of L'Assommoir, En ménage, with its air of nihilistic disillusionment, its hero whose half-hearted artistic efforts are supported by a private income, its pairing of the hero with his childhood friend in many scenes, especially the last, when together they draw up the balance-sheet of their lives, evidently seems reminiscent of L'Éducation sentimentale. But the interaction of historical and imagined events which makes up Flaubert's 'moral history of his generation' has no place in Huysmans' novel, nor, more significantly, has the subversive authorial irony which deflates all Flaubert's characters. (131) Huysmans' two main characters have a lucidity which allows the

author's ironical or comic comments to be channelled through their perspective.

The world of noisy objects, smells, light and shadows that engulfs the people of Les Soeurs Vatard still surrounds the characters of En ménage. In the street scene at night which opens the book, description dominates movement and dialogue; movements within the description are frozen into the stasis of a tableau vivant ('Un rat se faufilait dans le tuyau d'une gargouille,' p.7). A little later on, when André arrives home, to discover his wife in bed with her lover, we are made far more aware of the presence of the objects in the room than of the emotions of the three characters. In a way, this blankness has a certain elliptical psychological value. Rather than try to convey the surprise of André or the stunned shock of the two adulterers directly, Huysmans as it were transfers their panic to the room: 'On sentait, dans la pièce, une déroute effroyable, une panique immense.' (p.14) The paralysed silence of the characters ('Tous restaient immobiles, muets,' p.14) is further emphasised by being surrounded by the intrusive presence of the objects in the room -- the candle rapping against its holder, the draught blowing the flame, an azalea shedding its petals, a petticoat cascading on to the floor, the clock ticking, the smell of perfume with its erotic implications.

André is besides a passive character, incapable of spontaneous action; thus he has no immediate impulse about how to deal with his wife's betrayal (anger, jealousy, violence etc.), and finally can only envisage the alternatives open to him as 'Les deux rôles' (p.20) -- action carried out with little conviction. The first chapter ends on a note of absurd anticlimax, with André showing the embarrassed lover down the stairs, refusing his visiting card,

warning him to mind the step. Such an approach, allowing the manifestations of the exterior world to encroach upon characters who seem incapable of positive action and submit unheroically to force of circumstances, milieu, seems again a typical example of the naturalist view of man as the insignificant prey of forces both within and without himself. (132)

One way in which Huysmans manages to fuse his recording eye with the story enacted by his characters has already been indicated: André's perspective is identified with that of the narrator, the voice telling the story. He is more than a convenient observer who provides a suitable pretext for description; as a writer himself, his observation serves an aesthetic purpose for his own work -- in other words, anything he sees can in a sense be related to his psychology as a novelist attuned to the outside world. Apart from this 'justification', which could easily become a pretext, a sort of counterpoint is established between André's experience of the world and the aesthetic discussions he has with Cyprien about how an artist should experience and record the world; descriptions of his experience can be seen as illustrations of or comments on their discussions (chapter five, for example). In addition a certain amount of ironical reflection on the functions of the writer can be found in En ménage, which again adds to its personal effect.

One of the most entertaining setpieces in En ménage is set in a cheap restaurant ('un petit mastroquet' p.35ff.) visited by André at the end of chapter two. Food plays an important part in this and other works, in three related ways. Thematically, it is at the core of the problem of domesticity, the ménage: in a quite literal sense, the bachelor of limited means (and

André, who at this point has just left his wife) is obliged to engage on a quest for a supply, or supplier, of food. But this quest for meals obviously takes on a symbolic value, leading right up to the quest for happiness, God, spiritual nourishment etc.; or rather, it becomes a sort of physiological metonymy for all the associated aspects of the body, and the household. Eating is an act which emphasises the union of the couple who share their meal, or the solitude of the bachelor who eats alone -- the cheap restaurant is contrasted with the warmth of the united interior, the home. Apart from the element of companionship, in a more physical sense, eating with someone else can be associated with sharing other activities with someone else -- notably sex. In chapter twelve of En ménage gluttony becomes a substitute, or alternative, for sex for Jeanne and André. The two appetites are, as it were, interchangeable. The physiology of eating, the whole process from preparation, to absorption, to digestion and excretion, in fact reflects a certain conception of the human machine; good or bad digestion demonstrates the solidity of the nerves, one's emotional stability (André's shock at catching out his wife gives him colic, p.26); the strength of one's appetite and fastidiousness indicates one's sensitivity and resistance to the world.

Predictably perhaps, André's 'horribles douleurs d'entrailles' (p.26) aroused the wrath of contemporary critics. 'M. Huysmans plonge dans un vase de nuit,' exclaimed E. Coppelio in Gil Blas, adding extravagantly:

dans le roman En Ménage, on va aux lieux d'aisances plus souvent que dans la vie réelle. (133)

Similarly, Edmond de Goncourt considered that

l'auteur est trop amoureux de caca. - et de caca déversé par petites chiades sur toutes les pages. (134)

Recalling the reference to 'l'acre pissat de chat' which had entertained or infuriated reviewers of Les Soeurs Vatar (Les Soeurs Vatar, p.14), A. Scholl greeted En ménage with a laborious parody of Huysmans' supposedly scatological manner. (135)

It is perfectly true that evacuation of the bladder or bowels seems to be an obsession with certain naturalist novelists. Thus in Alexis' story 'Les Femmes du père Lefèvre' for no apparent reason a group of prostitutes is seen urinating in a sidestreet -- as though a naturalist story would not be complete without such an incident. The most notorious celebration of scatology is of course Hennique's story 'Benjamin Rozes'.

According to O.R. Morgan:

Scatology and truculence are allied in this quaintly putrid tale, in which defecation is a constant activity, and in which Hennique reaches the extremes of Naturalist anti propriety. (136)

The opening sentence of 'Benjamin Rozes' indicates, however, that Hennique is aiming at a rather macabre humour:

Le matin où il s'aperçut de ce qui lui survenait, durant sa promenade habituelle, le long d'une petite source dont la voix était rieuse, presque à l'entrée d'un bois situé à un demi-lieu du pays natal, M. Rozes, accroupi, déculotté, ancien notaire, se releva tout pâle. (137)

Hennique has a penchant for connecting totally disparate elements in the same passage or sentence with grotesque effect. (138)

Thus here the vulgarity of 'accroupi, déculotté' is somehow magnified and made even more outrageous by the addition of 'ancien notaire' -- in itself totally irrelevant -- to the enumeration; similarly the tritely idyllic setting suggested (and no doubt derided) by the 'laughing brook' seems burlesquely out of place with what the unfortunate Rozes is doing there.

Replying to critics who apparently objected to the pages in his novel Le Roi des aulnes where the hero inspects his stools,

Michel Tournier comments:

J'ai dit que mes romans étaient autant de tentatives pour transcrire en images et en histoires un certain fonds métaphysique. Eh bien, c'est un fait, on dirait que jetée dans le creuset romanesque, l'ontologie se métamorphose partiellement en scatologie! (139)

While the excremental offerings of certain of Huysmans' fellow-authors seem nearer schoolboyish bad taste than metaphysics, Tournier at least provides one possible justification for underlining fundamental bodily processes. In En ménage and elsewhere, Huysmans skilfully gives an impressive resonance to an apparently trivial or vulgar area of life (the process of eating), establishing a thematic network which is communicated by a battery of culinary or alimentary images, so that there are few areas of experience where food does not intrude. (His stylistic inventions will be discussed more fully in the next chapter on A vau-l'eau.) Descriptions of eating occur frequently; Huysmans serves up a large number of revolting meals, whose nauseating ingredients are presented with macabre verve. It is worth recalling, however, that not all meals are bad: the quality of a meal seems to depend as much on the emotional context it is eaten in as the cooking. (140) Normally, the restaurant meal signifies isolation and is therefore bad; whereas the meal eaten at home reflects either the warmth or disunity of the household -- good when André eats with Cyprien and his maternal concubine Mélie, ghastly when Cyprien eats with André and his frigid wife Berthe. And recently reunited with Jeanne, André devours a German meal in a brasserie with greedy relish.

To return to the passage in the restaurant in chapter two,

it has then an exemplary value both thematically and descriptively in the novel as a whole. The strident insistence on the repulsive, fatuous or bizarre gives it a tone of macabre humour again typical of Huysmans -- and in fact these pages were anthologised by André Breton. (141) The descriptive details which supposedly depict the banal furnishings of quotidian existence are in fact rarely banal. Sometimes the sheer cumulation of detail produces a picture where the object is as if it were magnified beyond recognition. Thus there is a sort of obscenity in some of the items in the restaurant window -- mainly because the author lingers a little too long over them: a melon is not simply growing in a bottle, but is 'tumescent' ('se tuméfiait', p.35); a rabbit becomes a disembowelled corpse:

un lapin, ouvert sur un plat, les quatre pattes en l'air, étalait le violet visqueux de son foie sur sa carcasse lavée de vermillon très pâle. (p.36)

The object is transformed into a sinister aesthetic spectacle, dead organic matter is made into a still life -- one way of escape from the cycle of nature.

The macabre or bizarre is in fact never far below the surface of reality even before the 'decadent' works, as this scene in the restaurant also demonstrates. Concluding his inventory of the contents of the main room, Huysmans draws attention to a cage hanging from the ceiling, inhabited by a cuttle-fish owing to the demise of the previous occupant. A succession of fatuous conversations overheard by André ends with a lecture on the manufacture and sale of false teeth by an itinerant quack. Elsewhere in the book, the author lingers similarly over the manias and oddities of characters who appear incidentally: such as the senile old man and the apprentice toasting her hair on the stove glimpsed in the laundry in chapter three. A figure

like the 'marchand de soupe' of Cyprien and André's schooldays, displaying his illustrated manual on syphilis to the pupils (p.56), is seen as a sort of nightmarish childhood ogre in the manner of E.T.A. Hoffmann's Sandman. The penchant which Huysmans reveals for the more lurid and marvellous episodes of Christian legend in later works is thus already present in this urge to pick out the more extraordinary aspects of the everyday.

Although the restaurant scene is highly successful on its own terms, André's part in it is little more than that of passive observer. There is a certain ironical contrast between his irritation with the place and impatience to leave and the thoroughness with which the restaurant is described. The slowness of the service is matched by the delaying effect produced by the lingering inventory of the room. P. Hamon has described Zola's attempt to use character to place or permit description, because of his wish that

la description doit être sentie par le lecteur comme tributaire de l'oeil du personnage qui la prend en charge (...) et non du savoir du romancier (Une 'fiche')... (142)

Consequently, Hamon argues, a certain 'thématique vide' arises; for instance, heights which in Stendhal promote the theme of euphoria, in Zola may merely offer an outlook for description. (143) Here, then, André's perspective is perhaps simply an instance of this 'thématique vide'. In chapter eight, André's sudden 'discovery' of his quarter early one morning seems even more of a blatant pretext to insert an exhaustive description (p.200ff.), particularly as he has already inspected the area in detail from his balcony in chapter five. These descriptions in chapter five, on the other hand, are more closely related to the character's inner life and actions. André's observations of the activities

of the rue Cambacérès (where he lives, opposite the Ministry of the Interior), for example, show him putting into practice Cyprien's exhortations in the same chapter to explore the 'street', the topography and ambiance of the quarters of Paris. (144) At the same time, his voyeuristic curiosity (which allows him to penetrate to the private lives of the civil servants whose offices are exposed to his balcony) is an escape from idleness; he lacks the will-power to concentrate on his work and is so hypersensitive to his surroundings that he has to 'absorb' them for a fortnight 'de telle sorte que leur appétit de distraction cessât.' (p.123)

Inherited from the Goncourt brothers, (145) this interaction of inner and outer worlds may seem to be anticipatory of Proust. Objects may be seen as an involuntary stimulus to or containers of memory ('Toute une bouffée de souvenirs amoureux s'échappait de ce papier,' p.215). Darkness stimulates recollections, light drives them away. (pp.152-54) The Luxembourg gardens are a repository of adolescent memories for Cyprien and André. (p.46) The description of the terrace of the gardens (the three paragraphs beginning 'Ils sentaient autour d'eux un silence enveloppé de bruit,' for example, p.49) fills in, in a manner of speaking, the 'space' occupied by the characters' reverie, adding at the same time a sort of sensual substance to the world around them which is so rich in associations. The description thus helps the transition from objects, their stimulating effect, to reverie, first suggested by this 'pause', and then recounted in dialogue; finally the narrator takes over and summarises this dialogue. (p.53)

Hubert Juin remarks about such scenes of reminiscence, referring to Cyprien, André, Folantin and des Esseintes:

Tous, et chacun, connaissent l'illumination proustienne: un goût retrouvé leur restitue une scène couronnée par le bonheur. (146)

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But such an analogy is misleading. Objects or sense impressions may well recall scenes or feelings from the past in En ménage, A rebours, A vau-l'eau and later works. For example, in the theatre, M. Folantin has recollections of sound, taste and smell (A vau-l'eau, chapter three). However, characters rarely seem to be 'illuminated' by such moments, or even cheered up. André's recollections of school give him 'des nausées'. (p.55) (147) From recalling their own unhappiness, André and Cyprien move to a vision of universal misery, as they examine the failures of all their schoolmates. 'Dieu de Dieu! quel tas de boue l'on remue quand on se reporte en arrière,' says André. (p.60) One recalls Baudelaire's observation in La Fanfarlo: 'le souvenir n'est qu'une souffrance nouvelle.' (148)

Thus 'involuntary memory' (or, more precisely, scenes based on reminiscence) in En ménage or other works does not really have the pretension of proving the continuity of the self, of suggesting an escape from the assaults of time, the quotidian, and so on. It is better to see such scenes in terms of Huysmans' intimate linking of senses, imagination and spirit, and above all perhaps his narrative technique. Action, from En ménage onwards, is based far less on a continuous series of events in the present, in which the character carries out various activities, than on the exploration of various moments in the life of the hero. When past moments are recounted, the hero is at it were immobilised in his present, and interior monologue or the narrator's voice takes over. Thus we have Cyprien and André in the Luxembourg gardens ('Et ils alternaient, l'un l'autre, à mesure que les souvenirs leur revenaient' p.53); memories stirred up like ashes in chapter eleven (p.280); André brought back to the present in chapter

twelve after a long reverie by his slipper tapping on the floor (p.303). Such details anticipate the virtual dissolution of the present in, say, chapter seven of A rebours, when we are told des Esseintes 'revécut toute son existence,' (A rebours, p.112) living off the substance of his memories.

The interaction of senses, emotions and spirit is most fully demonstrated by Huysmans' treatment of sexual relations in En ménage. Although sex is often presented metaphorically as an appetite in terms of eating and drinking (for example p.163), the author's exploration of 'la crise juponnière' in chapter six shows how far he now is from crude ideas about naturalist psychology consisting merely of brutish appetites and instincts. Essentially the 'fièvre juponnière' is due to the hero's revolt against solitude, to the desire for the intimate presence of another person, of another personality, the simple sound of whose movements, speech, gestures and so on implies some sort of emotional communion:

Il désirait la femme, non pour l'étreinte charnelle de son corps, mais pour le frôlement de sa jupe, la cliquette de son rire, le bruissement de sa voix, pour l'air enfin qu'elle dégage. (p.152)

André's recollection in chapter two of 'l'adorable mouvement de sa femme, relevant sa manche et servant la sauce' (p.21) has an erotic poignancy which goes beyond sex; just as the plates André glimpses in the kitchen metaphorically express the charms of married life, so too the gesture of his wife combines sexual appeal and domestic utility, the intimacy of the stable 'interior'. Consequently his yearning when alone is not simply for a sexual outlet. Prostitutes provide a very unsatisfactory 'medicine' and are mentally debilitating:

Il ne trouvait chez elles l'apparence ni d'une sympathie, ni d'une politesse, d'un plaisir quelconque, encore moins. (p.160)

Though one might ask why prostitutes should be sympathetic or pretend to be other than they are, this comment reveals one of the basic impulses of André's attitude towards women -- a desire for affection and companionship -- which is constantly at odds with the contempt which he and the author seem to share for the female sex. Perhaps because of this paradoxical and frustrating combination of feelings, the words love or happiness rarely occur, or if they do, take on a bitterly ironical tone.

The account of Berthe's upbringing and marriage to André in chapter four reveals an inveterate misogyny on the part of the narrator. It is more or less a law of nature that 'l'éternel féminin' is a bloodsucker (p.83, p.95); Berthe's limitations are typical of her sex ('la légèreté de sa cervelle de femme,' p.84); similarly, the soul-destroying conflict which ranges her against André is virtually seen to be a general feature of marriage. (p.92) According to Cyprien, the war between the sexes has been laid down by 'Providence'. (p.169) Genuine affection does not exist: André is glad enough to find its 'apparence'. (p.158) And yet beneath this grim cynicism there is an undercurrent of intense, repressed desire: 'Ah! s'il existait un émétique qui vous fasse rendre toutes les vieilles tendresses qu'on a là-dedans!' (p.11) exclaims André, who seems well aware of the contradictory nature of his attitude ('c'est peut-être drôle de mépriser les femmes, mais comme on ne peut s'en priver...' p.198). His lucidity is, however, combined with a curious hypersensitivity and weakness of will. He is aptly characterised by the adjectives 'amolli, troublé' (p.21); 'un grand amollissement

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lui vint' (p.369) we read, when, after some years' separation (cf. p.358), his wife reappears and he submits to her blandishments. Even when he simply spends a night away from home with Blanche, his exhaustion and discomfort seem exaggerated and excessive. (p.210)

André's reunion with Berthe closes the cycle of his adventures, with him having gained little more than an ironical awareness of the impossibility of achieving satisfactory human relationships. As both solitude and women are intolerable, frustration or renunciation of desire seem inevitable. The book concludes with the heroes claiming to have found 'happiness', after giving up both artistic and carnal aspirations for an 'ideal' of mediocrity. But they themselves seem to propose this solution ironically; 'tout ricanant', Cyprien hopes to be absorbed by 'l'éternelle bêtise de l'humanité.' (p.386) His very awareness of 'la bêtise' would disqualify him from becoming one of its adepts, one would have thought. According to André Thérive:

Le livre commence par des notations de laideur ou de saleté burlesque, il finit par la profession d'une morale désenchantée et qui se renie elle-même... (149)

This nihilism refuses both hope and despair, preferring a tone of cynical irony. According to Cyprien, 'Nous, nous nous estimons heureux quand nos convoitises se bornent à n'être pas satisfaites!' (p.28) and, appropriately enough, when at the end of chapters five and eight André is described as being 'parfaitement heureux', this happiness is due to the temporary cessation of his desires. He has reached the point in his emotional cycle where misogyny is temporarily in sway; thus in chapter eight, we are told, 'La lassitude des bêtises féminines avait guéri André de la femme' (p.213), although it is André's own stupid jealousy that mainly

brings an end to his liaison with Blanche. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this happiness is not its short-lived nature, but its emptiness; the emotions are, as it were, temporarily sated and defunct -- the very opposite of 'fulfilment'. Such an emptying is what Cyprien aspires to at the end of the book; and a passing comment suggests that true happiness can be found only in a complete cessation of consciousness: 'le seul bonheur qui soit peut-être complet sur la terre, être au chaud, dans un lit solitaire, chez soi.' (p.196) As Désableau sententiously remarks, sleep is 'ce symbole de la mort.' (p.113)

Like Maupassant, (150) in his fiction Huysmans reveals a horror of fecundity, a refusal of biological or natural impulses. As Brombert and Vilcot have pointed out, (151) the heroes strive to close themselves off from the intrusions of the world, yearning for a secure 'interior' (although the example of both des Esseintes and André shows that if they actually realise this self-sufficiency, they prove incapable of sustaining it). Thus the image of the 'lit solitaire' suggests not so much sleep perhaps as a refusal of desire, a primeval shelter from the pressures of existence; des Esseintes will try to 'se blottir' within his 'thébaïde raffinée' (A rebours, p.12, p.10). But in addition to des Esseintes's tragi-comic attempts to invert nature, illustrations of this retreat from the natural can be found in earlier works. Both the diseased urban landscape, on whose charms Cyprien expatiates in chapter five of En ménage, and the artificial, the man-made represent a sort of challenge or alternative to nature. In Les Soeurs Vataud railway engines appear much more charming, more personable, than the people who observe them. In En ménage, certain images similarly imply that man-made

objects are superior to natural ones: thus to convey the luxuriance and size of a display of fruits, Huysmans describes them as 'si énormes et si superbes, qu'ils semblaient façonnés par la main de l'homme' (p.222); or he presents 'de grands nuages (qui) roulaient ainsi que des fumées d'usine.' (p.6) Cyprien's enthusiasm for the street and its manifestations might superficially suggest an openness to new areas of experience, an awareness of 'the heroism of modern life', a rejection of outmoded artistic formulas (for example, p.128); but he insists with macabre relish on the 'souffrances et détresses' (p.125) of his urban sites and their inhabitants, and this disfigurement seems to be an integral rather than an incidental part of his aesthetic. (When Désableau visits him in chapter thirteen, he is, appropriately enough, illustrating a medical work on skin diseases.) Perhaps the real charm of such an outlook, as Lemaitre suggested, (152) is in the aesthetic posture it demands: the artist delights not in the world -- which is corrupt, ignoble, sick -- but in his own superiority as observer and recorder of this world.

Huysmans sometimes uses the word 'machine' to describe the human organism in En ménage. (153) To a certain extent this perhaps indicates a 'mechanistic' conception of psychology. The mind is heavily dependent on the basic processes of the body:

le moment de la digestion était venu et une terrible
lourdeur pesant sur la machine brisée de fatigue,
l'assoupissait dans son fauteuil. (pp.206-07)

Digestion becomes as it were a solemn occasion that demands a heavy due. Elsewhere, however, 'machine' is no more than a convenient metaphor, suggesting the smooth functioning of André's creative faculty (p.136), or even the mechanism of

domestic life, interaction between different characters. (p.247) But, as we have seen, Huysmans' gestures towards heredity in Marthe are nominal, and he skirts rapidly over Zola's views on science in the essay on L'Assommoir. In En ménage again, the most explicit statement on physiology verges on a parody of the 'naturalist' view of the interdependence of instincts and moral sense. In a speech which derides conventional views on marriage and class (as held by, say, Désableau), Cyprien also whimsically sympathises with his cat, which, having been castrated, has been rid of 'la douleur morale dès le principe.' (p.319) Ironically, it is in his supposedly post-naturalist works that Huysmans most fully explores the view of man proposed by contemporary science: to the very end he attempts to reconcile spirituality and positivism, vainly trying to demonstrate in Les Foules de Lourdes, for instance, that science can ratify miracles. If this concern only really emerges with A rebours, it is perhaps because in the previous works the exploration of writing and art is pre-eminent.

To conclude the discussion of En ménage, one should add that apart from being a psychological and sociological study of various forms of nineteenth-century domestic life (women in particular are seen to be highly limited by their social functions -- Berthe the vapid middle-class girl, Blanche the prostitute, Jeanne the couturière forced to leave André by financial necessity), the novel also gives a picture of the life of the artist at bay with his materials. Superficially the combination of André and Cyprien, the Bohemians, may seem to be contrasted with the figure of Désableau, the archetypal bourgeois. (154) Thus in a burlesque scene in chapter thirteen, Désableau pays a visit to Cyprien's household, and much discomforted by the antics of the attendant

housekeeper-cum-mistress M^llie and cat Alexandre finally beats an indignant retreat. The genteel poverty of D^ésableau's own household is described in detail in chapter four; the narrator makes no attempt to conceal his view of the futility of D^ésableau's occupation as a civil servant, (p.77) an occupation which D^ésableau himself considers with absurd pride, nor his disagreement with most of D^ésableau's opinions. If D^ésableau approves of America, for the narrator it is 'cet odieux pays.' (p.78) André and D^ésableau (whose wife is Berthe's aunt) share a mutual contempt for each other; for the latter the artist is a debauchee, (p.86) and he tries to have a junior colleague who dabbles in journalism dismissed.

Both André and Cyprien see themselves as anti-bourgeois characters, (p.32, pp.134-35) isolated too from the artistic community. However, if we recall Cyprien's relations with Céline Vatar and contrast them with André's experiences with his three women in En ménage, we can see that in both cases the two men have many bourgeois traits. André's marriage is in fact seen at both beginning and end of the novel to be a compromise with or submission to bourgeois morality; (155) but even his relations with Blanche depend on the fact that, having a private income, he can pay for her services. With Jeanne, he is reluctant to introduce her into his flat as a concubine -- surely a very conventional concern with respectability. As far as D^ésableau is concerned, however ridiculous he may be, we cannot help remembering that the author himself combined the roles of functionary and writer, and, more relevant to the novel, that the civil servant is himself a writer, a dealer in paperwork. D^ésableau's poring over his minute-books or adjustments of the

'style' of his subordinates may seem absurd (pp.183-84); but so too does André's practice of literature to the jaundiced eye of his wife -- 'une position qui consistait à tourner ses pouces et à écrire la valeur de deux lettres par jour.' (p.93) Huysmans' story La Retraite de Monsieur Bougran, as the next chapter will show, explores the intricate rhetoric and rites of the civil servant's life in more detail, and in his fictitious re-creation of his office, Bougran appears as a parody of the aesthete des Esseintes. To the outside observer, the functionary and writer accomplish much the same series of gestures.

Huysmans' willingness to show even the act of writing in an absurd light allows one to cast a certain doubt on the conclusion of D. Roche's otherwise excellent article on En ménage (one of the very few serious studies of the book):

L'aventure s'est déplacée. Elle est désormais aventure du langage. Le langage va être envisagé comme l'exploration et l'établissement de la Vérité, et entre autres formes de cette vérité, celle qui consiste à démontrer que vivre n'est pas une aventure. Le langage va aussi être envisagé comme essence d'une vérité personnelle, c'est-à-dire d'une ontologie: écrire pour être, pour se reconnaître, pour faire échec à cette vie de faux-semblant. (156)

While the characters of En ménage merely add to their futility by writing, be they Bohemian or bourgeois, A rebours might more obviously be taken as an ambitious attempt to justify such a self-reflexive creative enterprise; but just as des Esseintes fails to define himself by as it were extending his substance into his hermetic retreat at Fontenay-aux-Roses, so too Huysmans finally finds no satisfaction in simply extending his own personality into literature, and is driven to convert language into religious belief.

Roche notes too the circularity of En ménage. (157)

André returns to celibacy, Berthe to Désableau, André to his former maid, André to Jeanne, Berthe to André. This cyclical pattern of expectation being aroused and eventually failing recurs in all the future novels right up to L'Oblat. The lesson of the naturalist novel might well be that there are no beginnings and ends, only the endless flow of time. Models of naturalism? But En ménage clearly restores the thinking self to the novel, a complex aesthetic personality which has little in common with either the Vatar sisters or Gervaise or Étienne Lantier, and which evidently anticipates the solipsism of A rebours. Yet this self is dangerously exposed to the world both within and without: the vulnerability to 'la crise juponnière' and domestic crisis reveals pressures which seem typical of naturalism and also of Huysmans at his most entertaining. If 'intimisme' means those apparently trivial areas of experience which Huysmans magnifies to a catastrophic scale with impressive virtuosity, then En ménage successfully combines this personal imprint with the commonplaces of naturalism. And A vau-l'eau, the pivot between En ménage and A rebours, takes this combination to its furthest extreme, as a perfect condensed version of En ménage, as the next chapter will show. Thus while Marthe and Les Soeurs Vatar are essentially derivative models, incorporating many of the stock themes and techniques outlined in this and the previous chapter, En ménage can be seen as a personal model which lays down the pattern for the author's future works and begins the exploratory attempts to break out of the limitations of naturalism.

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CHAPTER THREE

SAC AU DOS AND A VAU-L'EAU:

THE CLOACAL, INDIGESTIBLE WORLD OF NATURALISM

Tout dépend du point de vue. Quand l'héroïsme semble grotesque,
la chiasse devient glorieuse.

(Léon Bloy)

Ne manger qu'un oeuf à la coque, mais être certain que le siècle
n'est pas entré dedans!

(J.-K. Huysmans)

Apart from his two collections of prose poems, Huysmans wrote four short pieces of fiction: Sac au dos (1877 and 1880); A vau-l'eau (1882); Un dilemme (1888); and La Retraite de Monsieur Bougran, published posthumously in 1964. This chapter will concentrate on the first two stories, both of which are important for the author's career as a proponent of naturalism. Sac au dos was published in Les Soirées de Médan in 1880, the book which supposedly consecrated the formation of the naturalist school led by Zola; while A vau-l'eau, two years later, is a sort of pivot between Huysmans' three early novels, and the revolutionary A rebours. Both again reflect typical preoccupations of naturalism: an iconoclastic presentation of the Franco-Prussian War in Sac au dos, apparently breaking patriotic taboos; the description of the glum existence of a petit bourgeois employé and the urban scene in A vau-l'eau. In each story, moreover, the physiological or biological finally dominates the historical or sociological: though typical of a certain social class, (1) M. Folantin in A vau-l'eau is mainly engaged in a quest for food which is perpetually frustrated, and his physical odyssey through cheap, nauseous restaurants ultimately acquires a metaphysical status. While ingestion is the preoccupation of the hero of A vau-l'eau, Sac au dos approaches the problem from the other end of the digestive cycle and is largely a chronicle of dysentery. If M. Folantin, with his faltering appetites, can at least choose to refuse the revolting dishes which his world of unappetising restaurants offers him, the hero of Sac au dos, on the other hand, is forcibly conscripted into the 'garde mobile de la Seine', and perhaps the uncontrollable voiding of the bowels which follows is his attempt to evacuate and be evacuated from the dangerous

world of the military and war.

The initial drafts of Sac au dos were probably written as early as 1872 (Huysmans' first book, Le Drageoir aux épices, was published in 1874). (2) Even the final version of 1880 has an episodic, disjointed structure, and reads like a personal journal, beginning with the narrator's departure from Paris and ending with his return. A vau-l'eau, however, is a much more impressive work, distilling the essence of the early novels in eighty pages, treating the central figure with an ironical objectivity (while Sac au dos is avowedly autobiographical), and encapsulating in four brief chapters both the desolate life of M. Folantin and the naturalist universe which Huysmans seeks to explode in A rebours.

As for Un dilemme and M. Bougran, critics generally agree that they are among Huysmans' slightest works. For Lucien Descaves, the first 'tient peu de place dans son oeuvre', while Pierre Cogy finds the second a 'fantaisie assez laborieuse'. (3) Though written after A rebours, they are both nearer to the manner of A vau-l'eau. Un dilemme is a conte cruel which presents an alternative version of the bourgeoisie to the genteel misery of A vau-l'eau, while M. Bougran gives a more detailed picture of civil service life and at the same time can be seen as a comic variant on the imaginative project of A rebours. Both stories will be examined briefly at the end of this chapter, after the discussion of Sac au dos and A vau-l'eau.

In a recent article, A. Pagès remarks that:

Les Soirées de Médan restent importantes pour nous, non pour le contenu de quelques nouvelles rassemblées dans un recueil, mais pour le mythe qui s'attache à elles (4)

-- the myth of the foundation of the naturalist school led by Zola.

(According to R. Dumesnil, 'Le "groupe de Médan"... n'est pas à lui seul tout le naturalisme, mais il en est le noyau essentiel.')(5)

And yet if one takes no account of the literary content of the book, is one left with anything more than an abortive publicity campaign? In his social history of literary groups during the naturalist period, C. Charle discovers little coherence in Les Soirées de Médan:

En effet, de même que le titre renvoie à la propriété de Zola à Médan, acquise avec l'argent procuré par les succès commerciaux de ses romans, le but de l'oeuvre commune est, sans conteste, d'utiliser la renommée de l'un de ses membres pour lancer les autres. (6)

A contemporary reviewer like Jean Richepin was already well aware of the flimsiness of the group's unity:

Entre ces six écrivains, l'accord et la raison d'être ne sont... qu'apparents. Le faisceau se brisera de soi-même. L'école n'existe que sur la couverture des Soirées de Médan. (7)

Richepin's prediction was of course fulfilled: eight years later Huysmans wrote, cuttingly:

Au fond, toutes les Soirées de Médan sont composées de charcutiers, de commerçants. Il n'y en a pas un seul parmi eux - et j'ai honte d'en avoir fait partie - qui soit réellement soulevé par l'art. (8)

Even if one approaches the book from a literary perspective, it is hard to avoid disappointment. E. Henriot found it 'un livre étrangement daté et démodé'. (9) The stories of Hennique, Céard and Alexis in particular

sont d'une bêtise à faire pleurer par la prétention à faire vrai et la solennelle gravité de ces "réalistes" en face de la "tranche de vie". (10)

It is pointless to deny this charge; the only outstanding story in the collection is 'Boule de suif'. (11) But it has been argued in the previous chapters that naturalism is best approached in a threefold way: not simply as a literary group or public institution

(Les Soirées de Médan perhaps indicates the limitations of this aspect), but also as a set of attitudes and a particular mode of writing. The preface to Les Soirées de Médan in fact does tell us that the stories seem to 'procéder d'une idée unique, avoir une même philosophie'. Whatever the short-lived nature of the 'groupe de Médan', one may ask then how far Sac au dos in particular exemplifies this philosophy of naturalist writing.

In a letter to Hannon of 13 December 1879, Huysmans notes:

J'ai dû refaire un nouveau Sac au dos pour un volume que nous faisons avec Zola contre le patriotisme et l'armée.

Three years later, he observes to another correspondent:

s'il y a quelque chose que je hais sur la terre, c'est l'ignoble armée et les ridicules imbéciles qui nous prônent le pioupiou, le patriotisme... (12)

C.Digeon has pointed out that most of the literary works written about the War in the decade before Les Soirées de Médan were uncritically chauvinistic -- one thinks, for instance, of Alphonse Daudet's Contes du lundi (1873). Les Soirées de Médan does then introduce a new tone of anti-militarism to the subject. (13) Yet although only Zola of the six authors was not involved in the War in a military function, one finds no real analysis of the political causes or major events of the War in any of the stories (in fact it is Zola who attempts this analysis in La Débâcle twelve years later). (14) As Digeon says,

Le titre choisi par Alexis, Après la bataille, est (...) révélateur: la vision naturaliste de la guerre, c'est plutôt que le combat lui-même, ce qui se passe derrière les combattants, ou après leur lutte. (15)

Of the six stories, only Zola's, 'L'Attaque du moulin', deals directly with military action, as the French fight a tactical withdrawal, using the mill as a strongpoint and causing the deaths of the miller and his daughter's fiancé. The opening

pages establish a sort of blissful fairy-tale atmosphere of harmonious nature, love and happy rustic activity, with the industrious miller, his handsome daughter and her amiable sweetheart; Zola is clearly aiming to show the tragic destruction of this idyll by the inhuman brutality of war, (16) though he actually only achieves a somewhat melodramatic, sentimental effect -- the story was, rather appropriately, turned into an opéra-comique in 1893. (17)

Nevertheless, the tone of pessimistic derision of the other stories is not present (one possible title for the collection had been L'Invasion comique). 'Boule de suif' at least displays a technical brilliance and genuine pathos in its portrayal of the 'gredins honnêtes' who accompany the heroine in the coach. But the last three stories seem both contrived and wilfully negative: in 'La Saignée', the commander-in-chief of Paris under siege is as preoccupied by his mistress, an improbable femme fatale, and by practising a 'saignée' of the unruly populace, as he is by the Prussians. In 'L'Affaire du grand 7', soldiers avenge the murder of one of their comrades in a brothel by massacring all the inmates and shooting an officer (meanwhile the murderer apparently escapes). In 'Après la bataille', a lapsed priest makes love with an aristocratic widow in the cart carrying her husband's body. One cannot help concluding that, far from denouncing war, such stories suggest only a straining for effect and an indifference to suffering. Anti-militarism is less apparent than a penchant for a macabre and trite pessimism. When Sac au dos first appeared in L'Artiste (Brussels, August to October 1877), it was announced, somewhat bizarrely, as an 'idylle pimpante et gaie'. (18) A more appropriate summary of

Huysmans' account of his military exploits might be that which Léon Bloy puts into the mouth of the character Folantin in La Femme pauvre:

Je ne me cache pas d'avoir eu la foire tout le temps
et on ne vit que moi dans les hôpitaux. (19)

Huysmans' 'idyll' is rather like that of Hennique's character in 'Benjamin Rozes' doing battle with a tapeworm; (20) we are nearer the burlesque than the pathetic.

Huysmans himself was unimpressed by Sac au dos. He commented, when the first version was being serialised in 1877:

cette minuscule pièce n'a pour elle qu'une chose, c'est d'être vraie - La partie de l'hôpital et la soeur Angèle valent mieux, je crois, que le commencement qui me semble bien empâté depuis qu'il a passé par l'impression - Je vais voir à alléger un peu tout cela et à y faire quelques abattis et trouées. Ça manque d'air. (21)

The version published in 1880 in Les Soirées de Médan consequently underwent both major and minor alterations, although Céard and Caldain came to the conclusion after discussing the two texts in 1908 that the later one is 'plus sommaire et assurément moins vivant et moins coloré'. (22) M. Cressot, in a painstaking comparison of the two versions, demonstrates how many of the modifications made in 1880 show a desire for greater clarity and accuracy of expression. This does not necessarily contradict Céard and Caldain, since Cressot's approach is essentially grammatical and lexicographical rather than critical; however, he suggests that the vocabulary does take on a more 'naturalist' flavour -- 'flanquer à la diète' twice becoming 'foutre à la diète', for instance. (23) More interesting for an analysis of the naturalist texture of Sac au dos are the omissions and additions between the two texts.

P. Waldner argues rather strangely that the anti-militarism

of the story is toned down in 1880. (24) It is true one can find examples which allow the case to be argued either way: in 1877, Huysmans tells us the director of the hospital at Arras is 'intelligent et affable', adding sarcastically 'ce n'était pas un militaire' (p.162); in 1880 this aside is removed. On the other hand, describing the train journey to Châlons, in 1880 Huysmans adds two sentences which reinforce the chaotic impression of their departure -- two mobiles have already been accidentally killed, while the rest steal anything they can lay their hands on (pp.202-03). The lively, impressionistic description of the soldiers' departure which opens the story in 1877 is preceded in 1880 by a sardonic account of the narrator's previous career as a law student ('La puberté de la sottise m'était venue', p.198). The biographical nature of Sac au dos is reinforced: the hitherto unnamed narrator acquires a name (Eugène Lejantel), a middle-class background, and significantly he concludes this new preamble with the additional phrases:

La guerre avec la Prusse éclata. A vrai dire, je ne compris pas les motifs qui rendaient nécessaires ces boucheries d'armées. Je n'éprouvais ni le besoin de tuer les autres, ni celui de me faire tuer par eux. (pp.198-99)

Presumably, a certain irony is intended here: the 'motives' which justify butchery are bound to be spurious and the individual caught up in the military machine can only resign himself to this absurdity, it is implied. (On the other hand, in La Débâcle Zola does give the Franco-Prussian War the force of necessity, as a vital purging of the decadence of the Second Empire, destruction preceding regeneration.) (25) Nevertheless, Huysmans' wilful indifference to political events could hardly be more clearly expressed -- and the attitude is fairly typical of Les Soirées de Médan as a whole. The book's anti-militarism reflects a negative

attitude towards life generally and a desire to debunk sacred cows, rather than any more positive or trenchant enterprise of exposing the flaws and failures of military leaders. The appalling incompetence of France's leaders which is described in modern histories of 1870-71 is not revealed at all in Les Soirées de Médan. (26) Huysmans' hostility in Sac au dos is that of a belligerent individualist; but it is certainly present equally strongly in both versions -- and probably more strongly in 1880.

Two additional passages affirm this point. The first is the jeering of Field Marshal Canrobert, forced to beat an undignified retreat when he tries to review the ill-disciplined garde mobile. This incident (inserted in 1880, p.204) typifies the attitude towards the army shown in the story: figures of authority appear infrequently, but when they do are usually seen in a comic or derisory light (elsewhere a surgeon-major prescribes 'sa bonne tisane de réglisse' for every ailment, from venereal disease to tonsillitis, p.207). Though entertaining and perhaps factually accurate, such treatment is also rather facile -- such anti-establishment jibes require less effort than a more substantial account of the reasons for the collapse of the establishment. Though Huysmans' narrator casts himself in an inglorious light as well, nevertheless we are clearly meant to approve of his detachment from the cause he is engaged in despite himself, and his schoolboyish escapades in the hospital. Yet in a sense his behaviour is as equivocal as that of the bearded, posturing 'démoc' Cornudet in 'Boule de suif', who complies as much as the bourgeois characters with the heroine's humiliation.

The second passage added in 1880 is a soldier's account of his experience of combat at Froeschwiller (pp.227-30). -- the

only description of battle in the story, presented moreover at second hand. Unsurprisingly, the soldier's story is one of panic, exhaustion, and flight. The French are routed; he cowers in a ditch; an officer threatens him, but is killed by the enemy. The recruits generally refuse any responsibility:

'Qu'ils aillent se faire tuer,' disaient-ils, en désignant les officiers, c'est leur métier à eux! 'Moi, j'ai des enfants...' (p.229)

And the man congratulates himself on having finally gained the security of the hospital. For this point of view, which Huysmans' narrator shares (he himself has never even left the hospital), the individual's duty extends only to himself, or his immediate family; the outside world, which appears at its most horrific in time of war, is a place to disengage oneself from whenever possible. It is significant that this is the only episode which tries to convey something of the terror of battle: warfare is not simply outside the author's experience -- it is an area of experience which the whole story shies away from presenting.

As P. Waldner says:

le sujet profond de la nouvelle est sans doute moins l'évocation que l'escamotage de la guerre, la manière dont l'homme parvient à se soustraire à ses efforts et à triompher d'elle. (27)

To conclude this discussion of Sac au dos, it is worth emphasising that the scatological aspects of the story are more than an incidental piece of vulgarity: they are fully integrated into the individualistic, unpolitical perspective just outlined -- and the tendency to remove man from the socio-political sphere and throw him into a biological world of bodily functions and physiological fatality which, it was emphasised in the first chapter, is a keynote of naturalism, is thus well exemplified

in this story. Discussion of whether the first or second version of Sac au dos strikes a truer naturalist tone is likely to be inconclusive. Certainly, some additions in 1880, like the two passages discussed above, conform to the anti-militarism of Les Soirées de Médan, while some omissions might equally be explained because the relevant passages would not have conformed to the rather superficial cynicism and anti-establishment bias of the collection: the monks' verses on the theme of 'sic transit gloria mundi' copied off the wall of a former monastery for their picturesque charm (p.168) are omitted in 1880, while a passage apostrophising the lovable soeur Angèle is much abridged (p.172: cf. p.225). A move towards a more caustic manner is again indicated by the fact that the two women encountered by the narrator and his friend in Évreux are 'singulièrement affriolantes' in 1877 (p.175), but 'laides et bêtes' in 1880 (p.232) and are explicitly said to be 'des filles en carte' (p.239).

Yet other modifications in 1880 tend to reduce this acerbic style. A gory operation carried out in the narrator's ward is described in slightly less gruesome detail in 1880: the two images 'une rosée sanglante' and 'la pluie rouge' are reduced to 'une pluie rouge' (p.173: cf. p.226), and the blood splatters less freely over the nearby patients. Perhaps Huysmans thought the first version was too exaggerated; similarly, he suppresses a facetious passage in praise of the 'clysopompe' (used for injecting enemas) in the second version (p.170). On the other hand, a new ribald passage about chamberpots is added (old saucepans are used and the convalescents jestingly offer this 'stew' to the sisters, p.227). More important, however, is the new ending which Huysmans adds to Sac au dos in 1880. While the

narrator returns home in 1877 and contentedly surveys his bibelots and books before climbing into his bed ('blanc, mais peu virginal,' p.192) and lapsing into idyllic, mildly erotic dreams, in 1880 this celebratory homecoming is almost entirely suppressed, and the story ends on a deliberately cloacal note:

les douleurs d'entrailles un moment domptées se réveillent maintenant que les nerfs sont moins tendus et je me frotte doucement le ventre, pensant que toute l'horreur de la dysenterie qu'on traîne dans les lieux où tout le monde opère, sans pudeur, ensemble, n'est enfin plus! Je suis chez moi, dans des cabinets à moi! et je me dis qu'il faut avoir vécu dans la promiscuité des hospices et des camps pour apprécier la valeur d'une cuvette d'eau, pour savourer la solitude des endroits où l'on met culotte bas, à l'aise. (pp.248-49)

Defecation, 'entrailles', 'nerfs'; the terms in which naturalism sees the body could hardly be more blatantly stated. La-bas too will end on a similar image, though it is given a more substantial metaphorical extension (the sons of the bourgeoisie evacuate their souls through their bowels). Here in Sac au dos, Huysmans brings his military saga to a close: the horror of dysentery and army life is terminated. The protagonist has at last purged himself of the promiscuous menace of the military world, and can withdraw to the unexposed retreat of his privy.

This derisory image of personal security thus in a sense anticipates the 'thébaïde raffinée' of A rebours. But between Sac au dos and A rebours comes A vau-l'eau, and the withdrawal to a safe interior which concludes Sac au dos in fact becomes the constantly frustrated aspiration of M. Folantin, hero of A vau-l'eau. Sac au dos and Les Soirées de Médan are characterised by a somewhat immature self-indulgence: in Sac au dos the narrator congratulates himself on escaping the horror of war, barely aware of those

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caught up in this horror; in 'La Saignée' or 'L'Affaire du grand 7', violent incidents are presented with a rather facile cynicism, and no compassion. Whatever the anti-military tone of Les Soirées de Médan, its criticism of the army is historically insubstantial; the very title of the book suggests that, far from being an iconoclastic manifesto, it is the consecration of a commercially successful writer and his associates. A vau-l'eau, however, is a much more impressive work.

Huysmans himself was fully aware that A vau-l'eau was something more than a fictional biography in the naturalist manner derived from his personal experience. Writing to his Belgian publisher Kistemaekers on 31 December 1881, he explains his agreement with Zola's advice that he should change the title of the story from Monsieur Folantin to A vau-l'eau, in order to bring home more forcefully that

ce n'est pas de M. Folantin qu'il s'agit, mais bien du célibataire isolé et triste. (...) c'est une idée abstraite qui a dirigé ma nouvelle. (28)

As one might expect, Huysmans found the initial inspiration for A vau-l'eau in his own life, as the following passage from an unpublished letter to Théo Hannon of 16 October 1881 indicates:

Ici, c'est le spleen accablant. On clapote, dans la boue, sous les rafales - C'est affreux - joignez à cela, que je n'ai pas de bonne pour l'instant, que je suis livré au bon vouloir de mon concierge, que je mange dans les restaurants, vous voyez la joie!

Ce qui me console, c'est que ça m'a donné l'idée d'une nouvelle qui m'amuse assez à faire, celle de l'homme solitaire qui mange dans les restaurants -

The 'abstract idea' behind A vau-l'eau is on one level to define the living conditions of the bachelor, a theme already familiar from En ménage, and treated more trenchantly in the 'Poème en prose des viandes cuites au four' in Croquis parisiens

(1880), which opens and closes with the sentence:

Ce sont les fallacieux rosbifs et les illusoires gigots
cuits au four des restaurants qui développent les ferments
du concubinage dans l'âme ulcérée des vieux garçons. (29)

The domestic position of 'le célibataire', who does not acquire the individualised personality of M. Folantin, is set out in this prose poem. First he passes marriage under review and rejects it; then he lapses into a reverie about an impossible collage with a 'maternelle compagne' whose main virtue would be her cooking -- her delights are symbolised by a 'joyeux tourne-broche, rouge comme un soleil'. Marriage, or its equivalent, is thus reduced to an unlimited supply of 'tout puissants rumsteck^s'; while food is endowed with a potent emotional, even erotic charge, children are abominated, as are any demands, sexual or social, the wife herself might make. Not surprisingly, this dream remains unfulfilled. The opening and concluding refrain of the prose poem also shows a metaphorical inversion of adjectives common to Huysmans: food is given a moral quality (meat is 'fallacieux' or 'illusoire'), while on the other hand the soul is reduced to the condition of the stomach by the epithet 'ulcérée'. A further sociological ramification of A vau-l'eau is its treatment of the familiar nineteenth-century topic of the employé: (30) but a richer, more literary interpretation of the story is also possible, a reading which reveals not only a thematic, metaphorical network of impressive density, but also a sort of ironic exploration of the limits of naturalist writing.

The phrase which opens the last chapter of A vau-l'eau ('Un soir qu'il chipotait des oeufs qui sentaient la vesse', p.77) might serve as a starting-point to demonstrate firstly that the metaphoric centre of the story is based on food, and secondly

that throughout the nouvelle there is a typically naturalist insistence on the physiological side of existence. The scatological reference (to 'la vesse', literally the noiseless emission of anal wind) which deliberately flouts or rather scandalously flaunts a taboo is a distinctive feature of naturalist writing, as the discussion of Sac au dos and the early novels has shown. One could equally cite La Terre, or for that matter in chapter fourteen of La Cathédrale the 'farces stercoraires' which Satan plays on Saint Christine de Stumbèle.

Ultimately, however, this apparent obsession with the basest bodily functions and faecal matter takes on a metaphorical significance, bringing us back to food: faecal matter perfectly symbolises a material world which is simply matter, but matter whose substance is degraded and illusory. (31) Even before he eats them, for example, M. Polantin's eggs are deprived of any nutritional value and reduced to the state of excrement ('la vesse'). As a general rule, one could argue that in A vau-l'eau food does not exist to be eaten and forgotten, but rather as an object of repelled fascination, an object whose texture seems patently inedible and irreducible. Thus in the first chapter, M. Polantin's cheese is transmuted into 'une sorte de dentelle blanche marbrée d'indigo, évidemment découpée dans un pain de savon de Marseille' (p.7); he toys with it (the verb 'chipoter' is used again, suggesting the essential impossibility of assimilating such food, p.8), (32) but understandably makes no real effort to eat it. Even when he strives to reduce such nauseating objects, he has no success: his beef is 'coriace et résistant... les chairs élastiques pliaient sous le couteau' (p.49).

Consequently the act of eating loses its customary meaning,

acquiring an anguished, equivocal quality: though he takes neither pleasure nor real nourishment in it, M. Folantin sacrifices a large part of his thoughts and empty hours to seeking food, food which always arouses his disgust when at last he finds it. Not surprisingly, commentators on A vau-l'eau have frequently emphasised the predominance of food in the story and suggested appropriate interpretations. For C.G. Shenton, food and eating represent metonymically the degradation of life and 'all the material vexations which are the substance of existence'. (33) And according to Jean-Pierre Richard, referring to all Huysmans' work:

Point d'oeuvre littéraire peut-être qui soit plus activement que celle-ci hantée par le souci de nourriture. D'une nourriture qui s'y consomme certes directement, littéralement, et selon des dispositifs multiples; mais qui sert aussi à marquer métaphoriquement de son signe tous les grands actes de la vie. (34)

Any analysis of the metaphorical structure of A vau-l'eau must of necessity begin or deal with food, like the melancholy hero himself who establishes a bizarre relationship with food from the beginning of his life, when, immediately after his birth, he is cleaned down with butter and powdered 'avec de la farine râclée sur la croûte d'un pain' (p.12). One might also quote the luxuriant proliferation of synonyms for all the activities related to food, eating or eating places in the story:

s'alimenter, déguster, savourer, brouter, chipoter, ruminer, s'empiffrer, mâcher, se repaître, bouffer, laper, broyer, bâfrer; résidus, boustifaille, rogatons, rebuts, becquée, mangeaille, pâture, dinette, victuaille, bibine; brasserie, estaminet, mastroquet, mannezingue, cabaret, crèmerie, gargot(e), bouillon, râtelier, réfectoire...

It seems that every aspect of existence is refracted through an alimentary prism. Leaving his office, M. Folantin tramples through 'des parfaits de fange, dans des sorbets de neige' (p.11).

For Michael Issacharoff, writing on 'La Structure métaphorique du récit: A vau-l'eau'.

Hanté par sa quête obsédante, le personnage, pour mieux dominer une réalité déplaisante, la transforme en éléments alimentaires. (35)

This interpretation is curious, in that one might object that this alimentary transformation of snow and mud, far from demonstrating the character's domination of reality, seems rather to show blatantly the opposite, that is, M. Folantin's failure both in his quest for food and in his desire to shelter from the elements. In any case, why 'explain' such metaphorical processes as the expression of the character's obsessions, when the character himself exists only through the play of language in the text, just as the images do?

In A vau-l'eau, metaphor produces a sort of alimentary invasion of every area of life. Experience can be savoured, digested, or induce nausea. Religious novels are tasteless: 'ils délayaient des cuillerées d'eau bénite dans le mucilage d'une gluante prose' (p.35), while M. Folantin abominates 'le bouillon de veau des Cherbuliez et des Feillet' (p.37), and rejects the actors of the Théâtre-Français ('des sauciers, et voilà tout!' p.55). On the other hand, realist novels are agreeable to the taste, and the charms of the Place Saint-Sulpice can be savoured from time to time. But if through this play of metaphors the world becomes a sort of comestible experience, food itself, through a reciprocal but contrary process, is transmuted into forms which seem completely unappetising (cheese becoming soap, meat elastic, eggs an obscene glue).

Food is especially linked to sexual impulses, again in a

reciprocal way. (One should note in passing that such connections are not of course specific to A vau-l'eau, or even to Huysmans' literary work: on 17 March 1879, he writes to Hannon: 'je suis névralg  , par suite de quelques exc  s culinaires auxquels je me suis livr  ...', excesses doubtless like those described in 'Sonnet saignant'.) Although J.-P. Richard talks of food being 'ch  ti  ' or even 'ch  tr  ' in Huysmans, or describes, in other cases, the ways in which a 'puissance d  sirante' can be projected on to food (the ogre Gilles de Rais devouring bloody, highly spiced meats before committing his murders), (36) it is perhaps less food which appears in a sexualised light than the act of eating, or the situation in which one eats, the transactions which have to be made in order to eat. According to the naturalist conception of human nature, hunger and sexuality are both carnal appetites: for the young M. Folantin:

Ainsi que dans ces gargotes o   son bel app  tit lui
faisait d  vorer de basses viandes, sa faim charnelle
lui permettait d'accepter les rebuts de l'amour. (pp.16-17)

This passage at the beginning of the story recounting Folantin's loss of appetite establishes the parallel explicitly; the two sorts of hunger may even intermingle, since references to 'p  tures' or 'd  nettes' (p.17, p.18), for instance, can be interpreted either literally or figuratively. The vocabulary and tone of these opening pages show a painful preoccupation with the degradation of the flesh which is very typically naturalist. M. Folantin's birth and milieu condemn him to wretchedness; happiness, it seems, is excluded from the beginning. Consequently his quest for food has little to do with pleasure or sensual satisfaction. The 'turbulences du sang' (p.17) which inflame his youth will soon be replaced by

a venereal disease, and finally by a total draining.

If the boiling blood of youth is a naturalist commonplace familiar from Marthe or Les Soeurs Vatard, M. Folantin's final position is exactly that which will be adopted by des Esseintes:

incurieux, presque impuissant, il restait là, chez lui, dans un fauteuil, auprès du feu. (p.17)

The terminal point of the early novels (which end on images which strive to reject the predominance of the body in the naturalist vision, or at least show its derisory nature -- Ginginet's corpse being sliced open as a medical specimen, Cyprien and André retreating into the numbing shelter of 'la bêtise') and the starting point of A rebours (the hero, immobile in his sanctuary, striving to let imagination vanquish physiology) are thus in a sense held together in A vau-l'eau. But unlike des Esseintes, Folantin's physical impotence is only one part of a more general impotence of the will, an inability to project or protect his desires against a hostile reality (so that sleep, reverie, and finally a sort of renunciation of consciousness are proposed as 'solutions'). Folantin is a character imposed on rather than imposing; belittled by those around him, treated with a certain ironic distance by Huysmans himself, who nearly always accords him the hollow dignity of the bourgeoisie by calling him Monsieur Folantin. His impotence is often observed in a comical way: he engages in a battle of watches with his chef de bureau when accused of being late, but is defeated by his superior's 'puissant remontoir' (p.9), just as he is outwitted by the prostitute. He sees himself as grotesque, a 'vieil homme boiteux' (p.82), when he is accosted by the prostitute. But he submits to her will, just as he is dominated by the housekeeper, Mme Chabanel, in a reversal of the sexes, since this

'vieillesse haute de six pieds, aux lèvres velues et aux yeux obscènes' (p.20), with the appetite of an ogress, seems far more menacingly masculine than her master.

The sexual intimidation of waitresses in a restaurant seems even more explicit:

Une complète impuissance vous venait, en les regardant, (...) sous ces yeux qui jugeaient votre faim et vous la refoulaient au fond du ventre. (p.49)

Folantin appears too as a sort of voyeur, stimulated and excited by the hearty appetites of coachmen; but his vicarious hunger disappears when he tries to emulate their performance ('sa gorge se recroquevillait', p.42). (37) J.-P. Richard notes the auto-erotic undertones of Folantin's excitement at the thought of being able to eat alone at home ('sa hâte à jouir de son contentement, tout seul,' p.67). (38) Folantin's exchange with the pâtissière, 'dont le buste était entouré de Saint-Honoré et de tartes' (p.66), reveals an attraction which combines desire for the woman and for her food; 'ce n'est pas qu'elle soit jolie, mais elle a des yeux bien expressifs', he thinks sentimentally (p.67). The eroticised yearning for a supply or supplier of food also reflects Folantin's emotional deprivation; thus he envies the secure households of his neighbours, as he smells their cooking on the way down the stairs to pursue his uncertain quest through the streets (p.29). Ultimately, this eroticism forms part of the metaphorical process of A vau-l'eau as a whole: food or eating do not simply represent sexuality in some veiled way. Both appetites represent in concrete form the failure of desire in the naturalist conception of the world.

In other words, behind this account of Folantin's physical and moral impotence, the failure of his appetites, we can detect

a critique of the naturalist optic, at least insofar as it is based on a materialist, positivist philosophy. But before this second aspect of the story is discussed, certain other important elements which, like food, belong to the metaphorical network of A vau-l'eau, should be examined. Apart from the apparently paradoxical way in which Huysmans seems to throw into question the writing or vision of naturalism, a more primitive reading of A vau-l'eau can be proposed. M. Folantin is in the first place a man dominated by nature. Not only does he become the victim of the failings of his own nature (hunger, desire, sickness), but also he is quite literally the prey of the elements. Lashed by the wind and rain at the beginning of the book, the character and his way of life will be constantly influenced by the passage of the seasons, by changes of climate. The cyclical account of the hero's frustrated attempts to satisfy his desires (in the opening lines of chapter two, already, we read, 'il se laissait aller à vau-l'eau', p.25) corresponds to the succession of seasons from winter to winter in the four chapters of the story.

In his study of the metaphoric structure of A vau-l'eau, Michael Issacharoff draws attention to two series of 'elemental' images, based on water and fire. Fire, according to Issacharoff, is 'sexualised'. Thus in the first chapter, 'De retour chez lui, Folantin -- symboliquement -- trouve son feu éteint.' (39) And, in this critic's opinion, the absence of fire in the second chapter corresponds to Folantin's absence of sexual activity. As regards this last point one might however object that the hero's fire burns perfectly well in the third chapter (e.g. p.58), although he continues to live chastely -- and, on more general terms, that Issacharoff's argument takes no account of less

equivocal functions which can be attributed to fire. The best example of the sexualisation of fire is doubtless found at the end of the book, when the prostitute entices M. Folantin by promising him there is 'un bon feu dans sa chambre' (p.82) -- a fire which is of course entirely imaginary and which prefigures the protagonist's final disappointment and desolation (although he is able to have intercourse with the woman).

Nevertheless, the absence or presence of fire depends in the first instance on the weather or season. At the beginning of the second chapter, the Baudelairian spleen crushing Folantin beneath the rainy sky is dissipated; the appearance of the sun cheers him and he decides to leave his hearth, 'à ne plus vivre ainsi enfermé' (p.26). Food and eating may be eroticised, but fire, on the other hand, seems to be a vehicle through metonymy for themes relating to domestic comfort rather than to sexuality. The concierge is no more capable of building a fire than he is of satisfying M. Folantin's other domestic needs. It is quite possible that the extinguishing of his fire discreetly underlines the decline of the protagonist's desires -- at the end of the book Folantin returns home nauseated by his encounter, 'un souffle froid lui glaça la face', ^(p.85) and he is without matches to combat the cold -- but, in a more literal sense, this inability to build a fire is part of his general inability to create a comfortable interior, to direct his life, and so on. The presence of fire besides tends to suggest a cosy, dreamlike comfort remote from ideas of potency and fertility. In the third chapter, for example, fire represents the warmth and shelter of Folantin's interior, contrasted with the wretchedness of those who 'arpentent le pavé, sans gîte' (p.58) (a warmth doubly emphasised by his

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inexhaustible tobacco packet, his grogs, his roasting slippers).

But such moments of intimacy are short-lived. In the new agoraphobic Paris, all the seasons are hostile, the town is disfigured by 'de funèbres boulevards, rissolés l'été et glacés l'hiver' (p.26). Excessive heat can thus be seen in as negative a way as cold or damp (one recalls Huysmans' interminable complaints about the weather, hot or cold, in his letters). The heat of the fire can, however, have the effect of plunging the character into meditation, bringing a transition from the present to reverie. (40) Thus M. Folantin, while poking his coke, begins to reflect on his past life (this movement, which is partly a pretext on the part of the author to introduce additional information, is often taken up by Huysmans -- in the first chapter of La-bas, for instance). But there is another, more interesting scene of reverie, presented this time under the sign of water, when M. Folantin goes to the public baths.

Issacharoff has convincingly demonstrated the pervasiveness and negative value of images related to water in the story. One might establish categories relating to disorientation (as the title A vau-l'eau indicates, Folantin lets himself go adrift, 'navigates' through restaurants, is wrecked in vol-au-vents, while his health is foundering); to the elements (he is lashed by rain, depressed by snow, the walls of his room are 'glacés', p.70); and to food ('l'eau de vaisselle de son bouillon', p.34), which is adulterated, diluted, drowned in sauces. J.-P. Richard even talks of 'Cette castration humide de l'aliment, liée à un cauchemar plus général de la liquidité...' (41)

To return to the episode which takes place at the public baths, a passage commented on briefly by Issacharoff. Apropos of

the phrase 'il rêvassait et ses pensées s'opalisaient avec la buée, devenaient affables et diffuses' (p.32), he makes the following observation:

L'image belle et suggestive s'opalisaient renforce l'idée de rêverie poétique et montre le narrateur pour une fois dénué d'amertume ou d'ironie. (42)

But what should be emphasised in addition is that, exceptionally, water here acquires a positive charge. The motif of drifting ('aller à vau-l'eau') which elsewhere in the book suggests impotence, a lack of resistance to the current of life, is reversed here, to become a source of serenity and consolation: 'toutes ses détresses fuyaient à la dérive' (p.32). Folantin's thoughts dissolve, vaporise with the steam: a sort of liquefaction of his being takes place, which flows peacefully into the water, at one with nature. The heat of the water removes, it seems, its menacing qualities (cold, damp, ice) to leave a hospitable retreat ('Il se blottissait dans l'eau chaude', p.32), whose relation with Folantin's childhood has already been emphasised in the text. Huysmans rather bizarrely calls this dissolution of consciousness 'un excitant' (p.31). Perhaps he wanted to make a distinction between this agreeable torpor and the sinister renunciation which one finds in the other passages where the hero abandons himself to unconsciousness. At the end of the first, second and fourth chapters, for example, there are references to sleep, and though it is possible to attribute the first two references to the 'domestic' themes of the book (during a heat wave the bachelor has the advantage of being able to sleep alone in relative comfort), on the other hand the final reflections are explicitly figurative, forming part of a refusal of life which shows an overwhelming pessimism. (43)

If in the final analysis food and eating symbolise the protagonist's failure of will before an indigestible world, images based on water or fire can rather be related to a theme of the vulnerability and final abandonment of the self before the assault of the elements, the current of life. Not only is reality hostile to the individual but it is itself hollow and rotten; it has no solid substance or lasting value; everything crumbles at the touch, 'tout fêche le camp', as Folantin puts it (p.55). It is here that one sees the paradox of the naturalist vision which insists on the primacy of the senses and the material world yet simultaneously reveals their inadequacy and deterioration.

Victor Brombert has drawn attention to the themes related to clausturation to be found in Huysmans' works, the 'nostalgie d'un abri' of his characters, the solipsism which characterises his narrative technique ('Ses romans foisonnent en formules monologuistes'). (44) But although the outside world in A vau-l'eau is indubitably hostile and an agoraphobic anguish grips the hero before the 'interminables casernes s'étendant à perte de vue' of the new Paris (p.60), the desire to shelter within the interior ultimately proves to be equally sterile and negative. Throughout the story we gain the impression of an 'hantise du vide', of a claustrophobic reality shutting him in, from which he will never succeed in escaping: 'le vide de sa vie murée lui apparut' (p.11); 'ce spleen qui l'écrasait' (p.25); 'il se décida à ne plus vivre ainsi enfermé' (p.26); 'ce trou d'ennui qui se creusait lentement, dans tout son être' (p.37); 'la semaine s'égouttait encore, mais c'était le dimanche qui lui pesait' (p.59).

As Brombert points out, the hero may very well dream about

the ideal interior:

M. Folantin, dans A vau-l'eau, prend un air extatique en rêvant à son intérieur: expression d'anticipation que son confrère interprète comme l'attente d'une satisfaction sexuelle... (45)

But when it is a question of putting these dreams into practice, his attempt to 'habiller les murs glacés de sa chambre' (p.70) fails lamentably, at the end of the third chapter. As it happens, in this particular instance the failure is caused by the deceitfulness of the pâtissière asked by Folantin to deliver meals to his room -- but does this not in fact demonstrate the precariousness of the hero's aspirations, that his dream of a hermetic interior depends in reality on the services of others, that is, of the outside world? Although M. Folantin is profoundly antisocial, displaying a misanthropic hatred of the promiscuity of the crowd during his evening with M. Martinet, and although he claims to prefer the company of his own memories to that of his fellow diners, neither can he bear solitude, for then he is exposed once more to the void which he is unable to fill....

It is true that Folantin glimpses a possible escape from this vicious circle in religion, at the beginning of the last chapter. But he rejects the dogmas of the Church. It is not the spiritual resources of faith which attract him but the social aspects of religious practices:

Quelle occupation que la prière, quel passe-temps que la confession, quels débouchés que les pratiques d'un culte! (p.78)

In the second chapter, we have already read the reflection:

'Hors la religion, point de mangeaille' (p.26). Although this phrase anticipates with an obvious irony the future progress of Huysmans himself towards God, for M. Folantin religion is only a 'passe-temps'; far from thinking of spiritual food, he perceives

only the sociological advantages from which ecclesiastics benefit, for only they are able to eat well in the sixth arrondissement. And if at the end of the story, he decides to return to 'l'affreux bercail' (p.85), this communal suffering which he imposes on himself (his table companions are his 'coreligionnaires', p.46) seems entirely without positive value. (46)

The quest for food, for an interior in which to shelter from the elemental forces of nature, everything in this story, it seems, leads to a nihilistic refusal of life, or at any rate of life as it is presented in the naturalist novel. ('Il n'y a plus qu'à se foutre à l'eau après la lecture de ce livre' wrote Huysmans to Hannon on 7 November 1881.) But at the same time there is a sort of attempt to go beyond this pessimism.

All the references which have been noted to 'ce spleen qui l'écrasait', to the oppression of the elements ('le ciel pluvieux' of the second chapter, p.25), to impotence and the horror of the void, introduce us to a universe which is as much Baudelairian as naturalist. C.G. Shenton's observations are worth quoting:

This novel, situated as it is between Huysmans' naturalist period and the composition of A rebours, which is fully Baudelairian in its inspiration, illustrates how much the spiritualistes really have in common with the realists and naturalists. The Baudelairian curse in its realist form is pessimism, the conviction that desire is condemned to failure in the world, and the obsession with the degradation of all things, and the phobia of mediocrity. (47)

This 'spiritualisme', the desire to break the limits of a reality both threatening and rotten, which is expressed explicitly in A rebours and the works which follow it, is already present in A vau-l'eau, but appears only through a sort of elliptical process or negative implication which can be read between the lines of the

text. Folantin's attempts to escape from the constraints of the world towards an inner life (through isolation, reverie or religion) fail because of his impotence when faced with the nauseating substance of outside reality and of his own corporeal reality, whose most concrete forms are food and the need to eat. (48) (Des Esseintes too will have to submit to the demands of his own body.) However, this oscillation between revolt and renunciation which encloses Folantin's existence, has at the same time the effect of creating an atmosphere of claustrophobia and anguish which goes beyond the positivist principles of naturalism. In this sense, A vau-l'eau, by exploring the limits of the naturalist optic without however breaking the conventions of the genre, can be seen as marking the turning-point or pivot in Huysmans' work much more clearly than A rebours, where one perceives, at least at first sight, a much more obvious refusal and explosion of naturalism.

But according to C.G. Shenton's interpretation, there is in A vau-l'eau not merely a discreet questioning of the naturalist vision or philosophy, but also a virtual parody of the aesthetics and writing of naturalism:

A vau-l'eau owes its comic force to a stylisation of the naturalist vision itself.

The novel is not just an evocation of the weariness which life inspires, but, more essentially, of the weariness which the subjects of naturalism inspire in their author. M. Folantin in his drab world is the representation of Huysmans' disgust with the vision and aesthetic approach (of the school of Médan). (49)

One could argue, to expand on the terms of this interpretation, that if the character does not succeed in escaping from the vicious circle which encloses his existence, Huysmans, on the other hand, has found his own solution to the limitations imposed on him by

the naturalist vision by taking refuge in writing: he exacts a vengeance on the dull, boring subjects which are the prerogative of the naturalist writer by treating them in a parodying, caricatural manner, in other words reducing them to a purely literary pretext. For Huysmans the unbeliever everything becomes 'literature'. ('Vraiment, quand j'y songe, la littérature n'a qu'une raison d'être, sauver celui qui la fait du dégoût de vivre!' exclaims Durtal in La-bas, II, 108.)

Nevertheless, we surely run the risk of giving a false impression of A vau-l'eau by concluding that the story expresses only 'weariness' and 'disgust' (to repeat Shenton's terms). The opinion of Remy de Gourmont, for whom the nouvelle, while verging on a caricatural pessimism, finally takes on a sort of lyrical value, seems a more convincing assessment. (50) And indeed, if one takes account of the bitter comedy which arises from the accumulation of the hero's misadventures, or the somewhat grotesque humour of certain episodes (the description of the hideous Mme Chabanel, the risible scene with the prostitute), humour emphasised by the author's stylistic resources (he discharges a battery of synonyms for watches, for example, when M. Folantin, arriving late, quarrels with his chef de bureau), then what one really finds on reading this text is an impression of verve, of pleasure in writing -- which is precisely the opposite of disillusion or disgust. At the same time, the stylised brevity of the story, the density and continuity of its metaphoric structure, give it a vigour and richness not found in En ménage, a novel which admittedly anticipates many of the themes of A vau-l'eau, but in a very diluted fashion. Thus if in A vau-l'eau the reader discovers a questioning and subversion of naturalism, at the

he discovers a consecration of 'literature' -- but of a literature which still remains very naturalist.

Le Fon Socially M. Folantin is in a sense a marginal figure. Though he is an insignificant unit in the bureaucracy of the state and evidently a member of the bourgeoisie (whereas his father had been a shopkeeper and his mother when widowed had worked as a shop-assistant, pp.12-13), as a poor bachelor he seems to be doubly excluded from the satisfactions of his class. (51) Hence his conclusion that 'le mieux n'existe pas pour les gens sans le sou; seul, le pire arrive' (p.85). Having dismissed Mme Chabanel, he goes without a servant, and this again reflects his inferiority, as a comment by Guiral and Thuillier in their book on servants in nineteenth-century France indicates:

Avoir un ou des domestiques assure un certain confort moral: cela donne exactement la mesure de la place dans la hiérarchie sociale et rappelle la toute-puissance de cette hiérarchie; on a quelqu'un à commander et dont le devoir d'état est de vous obéir en tout... (52)

Such points allow us to effect a transition to Un dilemme, written after A rebours in the spring of 1884, serialised in the Revue indépendante in September and October 1884, and appearing as a book in 1888 (though dated 1887). The story totally lacks the literary appeal and emotional resonance of A vau-l'eau; but in its account of the 'dilemma' of the title, it appears to deal with some of the social themes of sexual exploitation, class division and injustice more fully explored in novels like Mirbeau's Journal d'une femme de chambre (1900), or Victor Margueritte's Prostituée (1907).

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A rich young man, Jules Lambois, dies of typhoid in Paris, apparently intestate. His father and maternal grandfather Maître

Le Ponsart stand to inherit 50,000 francs each (one recalls that M. Folantin's annual salary was 3,000 francs). But first they have to dispose of Jules's pregnant mistress Sophie, which Me Le Ponsart does by presenting her with the following 'dilemma': either she was Jules's maid, in which case she is entitled to three weeks' wages (33 francs 75 centimes), or she was his mistress, in which case she gets nothing (Un dilemme, p.181). (53)

Defeated and apparently without means of legal redress, Sophie dies of a miscarriage. When her friend Mme Champagne writes to M. Lambois requesting money for the funeral, Le Ponsart tosses the letter on the fire, while Lambois observes with sententious villainy 'C'est trois sous de timbre qu'elle a bien inutilement dépensés' (pp.230-31).

As this summary suggests, Huysmans' denunciation of the bourgeois is strong on melodrama and weak on subtlety. He himself described the story as 'une simple histoire, destinée à témoigner une fois de plus de l'inaltérable saleté de la classe bourgeoise'. (54)

The appearance of the bourgeois as predatory monster may seem to clash strangely with the picture in A vau-l'eau: but Micheline Tison-Braun indicates how these are really two sides of the same coin:

Le bourgeois, c'est à la fois le matérialiste qui ne vit que pour son confort et que n'anime aucune illusion généreuse, et la victime des tabous sociaux, tour à tour animal de proie, exploiteur des pauvres et médiocre conformiste. (55)

Critics tend to pass over Un dilemme hastily; in some cases, not just because the story is an insubstantial piece, but because it seems to cause offence. Thus Brandreth calls it 'a quite deplorable little story' and Ridge is driven to say: 'It is difficult, even in Naturalism, to go beyond this point of crassness.' (56) P. Cogny

sees the story as a black comedy ('on est plus amusé qu'ému'), (57) and it does seem most appropriate to see Un dilemme as a conte cruel or histoire désobligeante written on naturalist lines, though it unfortunately lacks most of the trenchant humour of Bloy, the macabre inventiveness of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, or the dramatic intensity of Maupassant.

The disapproval of the two commentators just quoted is perhaps due to a certain tastelessness in Huysmans' humour. In the context of his fiction generally, Un dilemme is interesting mainly in two ways: the first relates to this rather ponderous satire, the second to the narrative perspective of the story. Un dilemme is the only work of fiction written after Les Soeurs Vatard where there is no strongly developed central character whose perspective dominates the action. In an autobiographical essay written the year after Un dilemme in 1885, Huysmans himself pointed out the vital, if rather repetitive, role played by this authorial 'avatar' in his best fiction, admitting his inability to create convincing secondary characters. (58) Thus he himself was aware of his limited strengths when it came to fictional invention, and the absence of this figure who in some sense is an authorial projection helps explain the weakness of Un dilemme. Interestingly, however, although the story poses as a denunciation of bourgeois meanness, particularly in the character of the avaricious Me Le Ponsart, in fact a certain ambivalence creeps in. At times, Le Ponsart begins to take on the role of the central hero; his behaviour acquires a familiar air; and one detects an almost sadistic complicity with him in his treatment of the pregnant, lower-class woman on the part of the bourgeois, misogynic author.

The exposition of the action in the first two of the six chapters leans somewhat laboriously on the tradition of satirising the petty self-aggrandisement of provincial mediocrities well established by Balzac and Stendhal. The self-righteous complacency of Me Le Ponsart and M. Lambois is emphasised by the heavy irony of the narrator; naturally they revere the Code. 'ce monument de justice' (p.144), which upholds their claim against the wretched Sophie. Though he is a lawyer, Me Le Ponsart is also a poet: for seven years he has been putting Le Bourgeois gentilhomme into verse, 'la gaieté de Molière étant pour lui compréhensible' (p.150). The two characters' views on women, however, bring them nearer to more customary Huysmansian attitudes. Superficially, their opinions may appear both fatuous and base: we see M. Lambois's 'lèvres goulues' slavering and Me Le Ponsart's 'oeil en étain' sparkling lecherously as their conversation excites them (p.143), and we learn that:

Elles ne valaient aux sens de Me Le Ponsart que boulottes et courtes (...). M. Lambois (...) était avant tout pour la distinction. (pp.143-44)

It is only in the satisfaction of his carnal appetites that Le Ponsart is prepared to abandon his avarice: 'la bonne chère et les filles' are indissolubly linked in his mind (p.146). Lust, misogyny and gluttony form a trio for this character which is different from the attitude taken generally towards women and sex in Huysmans' works only in its comparative crudity; unlike M. Folantin, Me Le Ponsart enjoys a certain vigour despite his advanced years. Having dined copiously, his mind turns to erotic thoughts:

Il songeait au festin de la croupe, au dessert de la bouche, aux entremets des seins... (p.158)

To be seen in any sort of positive sense in Huysmans' works, women have to provide services (domestic or sexual) for men: the amiable housekeeper-cum-mistress Mélie can be contrasted with the frigid and shrewish Berthe in En ménage: 'la maman Carhaix' with the 'diabolical' Mme Chantelouve who refuses to be subordinated in La-bas. If the 'good' women appear as maternal figures ('la maternelle compagne' of the 'Poème en prose des viandes cuites au four'), it is in a secondary sense: they do not bear children, but succour their husband or lover. For Me Le Ponsart in Un dilemme, lower-class women seem to fall exclusively into two similar categories: servants or prostitutes (Folantin's encounters are much the same). Thus for Le Ponsart, Sophie can only be either an object of sexual satisfaction (during his reverie in the restaurant, he begins imagining her as 'une superbe drôlesse dont il détailla les charmes dodus en frissonnant', p.163) or a maidservant to be dismissed. Her real dilemma is not the crude ultimatum she is given, but that she fits into neither of these two categories: socially, she is déclassée by virtue of her moral claims to Jules's estate; biologically, in becoming pregnant, she can no longer act as either mistress or servant, and having exceeded her function has to be disposed of -- Le Ponsart pays her off, Huysmans kills her off.

Me Le Ponsart's hostility towards Sophie is of course consciously motivated by the financial threat she poses; in addition, during their second and final interview he wants to avenge himself on her for the fact that a prostitute has made a fool of him -- again putting all women in the same category. (59) But two other examples indicate a less conscious hostility, with which the narrator seems in covert sympathy. Both reflect a refusal,

or rather displacement, of the maternal function (a displacement which reaches its climax in Huysmans' later cult of the Virgin Mary, the immaculate intercessor for all men). (60) The first is a bizarre fantasy which Le Ponsart experiences on reading an advertisement in La Vie parisienne for 'le lait Mamilla': his obsessive vision of ever expanding breasts combines sexual excitement with the most infantile form of nourishment (pp.161-62).(61) When, secondly, he confronts Sophie, this erotic potential is rapidly dispelled by the unpleasing reality of pregnancy:

Pendant ce temps, le notaire se faisait cette réflexion que ces pleurs ne l'embellissaient pas: ce ventre qui sautait dans la saccade des sanglots lui parut même grotesque. (p.177)

There is a deliberate dehumanising of the woman in this sentence. The swollen belly bouncing up and down is both laughable and monstrous: by presenting Sophie and later her friend Mme Champagne as they appear to the cruel eye of the lawyer (Mme Champagne, with her 'océanique gorge', looks, appropriately enough, like 'une harengère', p.215), Huysmans is able to debase both of them. Sophie and her defender Mme Champagne are defeated by the inhumanity of men, the bourgeoisie, and the law (Mme Champagne denounces all three, in vain). Me Le Ponsart (tactlessly called 'Monsieur Ponsart' by Mme Champagne) reveals himself indeed to be the master in terms of sex, class and legality. Huysmans shows injustice being done; far from denouncing it, he demonstrates a sort of grim complacency, exploiting the situation he has created to display a rather heavy-handed irony and humour.

Sophie's attempt to charm Le Ponsart with her finery at the final interview, for example, proves to be a lamentable

failure:

Malheureusement pour elle, cette beauté et ce costume qui eussent sans doute attendri le vieillard, la veille, l'irritèrent (...) la tenue débraillée de Sophie, qui l'avait répugné, lors de sa première visite, était la seule qui eût pu l'adoucir aujourd'hui. (p.215)

This ironic reversal seems somewhat factitious, not to say melodramatic. Mme Champagne, meanwhile, during this fateful interview, is barely able to utter a word: that very morning Titi, the dog, has mistaken her front false teeth for a bone and devoured them! Huysmans clearly prefers the ridiculous to the sublime; but as such details suggest, the story, whatever its grim or grating tone -- typical of a certain type of minor naturalist writing, which displays an unwholesome insistence on the mediocre and the macabre -- (62) in the final analysis rings very hollow.

Huysmans' attempts to recapture the conventional naturalist/manner after A vau-l'eau significantly prove to be failures. The novel on the Siege of Paris, La Faim, which had preoccupied him since the 1870s was never completed. (63) He began another novel called Le Gros-Caillou (a working-class district of Paris) early in 1882, but abandoned this project for A rebours. (64) Like Un dilemme, La Retraite de Monsieur Bougran, written after A rebours, again demonstrates that the naturalism of the early works had been spent; this story is a sort of hybrid of A vau-l'eau and A rebours. The idea of M. Bougran -- the retired civil servant who, to combat his solitude, creates a replica of his office in his home and begins a totally fictitious bureaucratic existence -- was noted in the 'Carnet vert' around 1886. Huysmans actually produced the story for a British journal, the Universal Review.

in 1888, but when the editor rejected it, he never allowed it to be published elsewhere. (65)

In a recent article, Anne-Marie Bijaoui-Baron discovers a 'cruauté terrible' and 'une très grande richesse symbolique' in M. Bougran. (66) But most readers are unlikely to be convinced by these claims; one imagines that Huysmans probably suppressed the story because it shows a new M. Folantin establishing his own derisory version of the 'thébaïde raffinée' and setting to work on a futile task in the manner of Bouvard and Pécuchet. Though Bijaoui-Baron curiously makes no reference to the obviously derivative nature of the story, mainly from Huysmans' own work but also from Flaubert's novel (67) -- perhaps because such echoes suggest a poverty rather than a 'richesse' of imagination -- on the other hand, she points out that the story does in a sense, whatever its parodying tone, reveal a nostalgia for the bureaucratic existence on the part of the author: the 'Ministère de l'Intérieur' provides an appropriate pun for a writer preoccupied by the search for a haven, an intérieur. (68)

While M. Folantin finds his office a desolate, unrewarding place, where promotion is gained by intrigue rather than industry, and his work is simply a laborious ritual, for M. Bougran this environment becomes 'cette coque qui l'avait, pendant des années, couvert' (M. Bougran, p.40). In one sense this may be because Bougran has attained the numbing vacancy seen by Folantin as the only 'solution' at the end of A vau-l'eau: he is entirely a function of the bureaucratic machine. But in another sense, one recalls that M. Bougran follows the decorative conceits of A rebours: just as form predominates over content for des Esseintes -- imagination supplanting 'la vulgaire réalité des faits' --

so M. Bougran is fascinated by the ritualism, the elaborate forms of administrative procedure and language. The nuances of bureaucratic language are described in some detail (modes of address, synonyms, and of course the Byzantine complexity of 'les salutations de fins de lettres').(69) M. Bougran is a 'pianiste de bureau', a skilful manipulator of 'ce délicat clavier' (p.37, p.38); but these skills are vanishing: 'tout se délitait, tout s'effondrait depuis des ans' (p.38). Des Esseintes's interior decoration in the first chapter of A rebours is repeated when Bougran sets out to imitate the appearance of his office with 'un infâme papier couleur de chicorée au lait' for the walls (p.50), the requisite furniture, reference books and so on. Embroiled in his papers, Bougran with his private obsession might be seen as a parody of any form of writing or literary activity -- or at least as a warning of the absurdity threatening those who prefer form to content.

But the hollowness of Bougran's project is soon exposed. The futility of his activity (and by implication of bureaucratic activity generally) is revealed from the beginning. His nostalgia is shown to be illusory:

tout l'envers de cette existence de cul-de-jatte
s'était évanoui... (p.47)

The functionary is a 'cul-de-jatte', immobilised behind his desk, paralysed and unmanned by the bureaucratic machine. Wandering in the Luxembourg gardens, Bougran contemplates 'cette fausse campagne' (p.44), and, in a bravura passage, notices the monstrous 'tortures' which the gardeners have inflicted on the fruit trees. But he leaves, the narrator sternly adds,

sans même s'être aperçu que cette chirurgie potagère
présentait le plus parfait symbole avec l'administration
telle qu'il l'avait pratiquée pendant des ans. (p.45)

Finally, Bougran is unable to sustain his own illusion: physical collapse ensues --

Il se voyait ruiné, caduc, écrasé par cet âge de cinquante ans qu'il supportait si allègrement, tant qu'il travaillait dans un vrai bureau (p.55)

-- and is followed, shortly afterwards, by his death.

The anecdotal richness and technical mastery which allowed Maupassant to produce hundreds of short stories are qualities lacking in Huysmans. Of his four short pieces of fiction (and this small number itself is obviously significant), only one is a work of substance, coming at a turning point in his literary career and his practice of naturalism. He seems unable to write successfully without a strong personal projection, which presumably reflects an affective (rather than an autobiographical) commitment to a character and his situation. Theorists of the short story tend to emphasise structural qualities -- action firmly directed towards a forceful conclusion -- at the expense of character or emotional depth. (70) Although A vau-l'eau makes its point rather more trenchantly than En ménage, at the conclusion the hero is deliberately left in suspension (as will be des Esseintes and Durtal), one cycle of expectation and frustration having been completed; but in a sense, the whole story makes the point that for Huysmans there is no progression towards a conclusion, only an eternal oscillation 'entre la douleur et l'ennui' (A vau-l'eau, p.85). While the hero of Sac au dos is finally content simply to be able to perform his more humiliating bodily functions in security, in A vau-l'eau the only solution is extinction of consciousness, while in Un dilemme and M. Bougran it is death.

Chronologically, Un dilemme and M. Bougran take us to the other side of A rebours, but if they reveal the continuation of

a conventional naturalist genre (subjects from contemporary life observed with a certain sardonic humour, which half conceals a pervasive awareness of mediocrity and degradation), both in matter and manner they also clearly demonstrate the truth of Huysmans' observation in the preface to A rebours that by 1884 the inspiration of naturalism as he perceived it was virtually exhausted. What replaced this form of writing, of which A vau-l'eau is arguably Huysmans' greatest achievement, is the subject of the next chapter.

* * * * *

CHAPTER FOUR

A REBOURS: AGAINST NATURALISM

Meillonas 2 avril (1965)

Achévé A Rebours. Aucun livre ne m'a davantage marqué.

Meillonas 7 et 8 juillet (1964)

L'ennui,
pour moi le moins avouable des sentiments,
l'autre jour, Jean Prat, se promenant avec moi dans Meillonas:
—Combien d'années penses-tu avoir encore à vivre? dix? vingt?
—Ce n'est pas le nombre, c'est de mettre fin avant que je ne
m'intéresse plus à rien, que je ne désire plus rien, que je
m'ennuie.
—Il t'arrive de t'ennuyer?
J'ai nié.

Je m'étais endormi vers onze heures avec les soporifiques
habituels. Je me suis réveillé. Il n'était que minuit
dix. J'ai crié: merde! ce que je m'ennuie!

Le pire c'est quand il arrive à quatre heures de l'après-midi
(l'heure où commence vraiment le plaisir de travailler, quand
j'écris) de se dire: qu'est-ce que je vais faire jusqu'à 7
heures (l'heure du premier whisky).

(Roger Vailland, Écrits intimes. 1968)

A rebours represents the first of several attempts by Huysmans at an emancipation from the constraints of naturalism in his fictional output, and is the first of three works which refuse to defer to the conventional structure of the naturalist novel. In La-bas (1891) the rejection of naturalism is explicitly stated in the first chapter, where a wider aesthetic is proposed in its place; the rest of the book is, in a sense, devoted to an exploration of this argument. In the previous novel En rade (1887) a satirical account of peasant life (which invites comparison with Zola's novel La Terre, published in the same year) contrasts strangely with a series of lurid dreams, an expanded version of the nightmare recounted in chapter eight of A rebours: again the naturalist view of the novel is being placed in a wider context. Thus A rebours can be seen as the initial phase of a three-part expansionist movement in Huysmans' work.

In the preface written twenty years after A rebours, Huysmans presents the novel as a complete rupture with his earlier works (A rebours, p.xxii), although his original intention had simply been to write a pendant to A vau-l'eau set in a more aristocratic milieu (p.xi). Retrospectively, however, he defines his intention in A rebours as being far more radical,

de secouer les préjugés, de briser les limites du roman, d'y faire entrer l'art, la science, l'histoire, de ne plus se servir, en un mot, de cette forme que comme d'un cadre pour y insérer de plus sérieux travaux. (p.xxiii)

Certainly Huysmans is right to point to the unconventional attitudes and encyclopedic designs which characterise his novel; but he does not so much overthrow or reject the naturalist model as expand or explode it. The themes and techniques of previous works are encompassed within a wider and far more ambitious project. Perhaps

the net result is to produce a totally new form of fiction: the aim of this chapter is to pursue the argument about the development of Huysmans' fiction through a discussion of A rebours and at the same time to try to analyse and do justice to the impressive richness and density of this work. An attempt to discover just what sort of transition is effected in the novel, and how Huysmans both 'interiorises' and expands the shape of his previous fiction, will run parallel to a commentary on A rebours, which in order to achieve a reasonable degree of coherence and readability will be centred on three topics: the hero, des Esseintes; the message or philosophy of A rebours; the structure of the book.

While one of the major achievements of the naturalist novel lies in its rendering of the texture of external reality, in A rebours the objects and phenomena of the world outside the self succumb to a solipsistic process. Not only does the hero retreat from human society into his 'Thebaid' at Fontenay-aux-Roses and strive for complete control of his environment and the conditions of his existence, but the world the text itself presents is channelled almost exclusively through the filter of the character des Esseintes, in the account of his plans, intentions, preferences, memories, reveries and so on. In the view of Remy de Gourmont, this procedure represents a reversal of naturalism. In the literature 'consecrated' by A rebours

Il ne s'agissait plus tant de faire entrer dans l'Art, par la représentation, l'extériorité brute, que de tirer de cette extériorité même des motifs de rêve et de surélévation intérieure. (1)

Similarly, M. Raimond in La Crise du roman opposes the supposedly naive faith in the real of naturalism (springing from the belief

that all society could be copied and so novels made, and from an acceptance of the efficacy of human action) to 'l'esprit fin de siècle' which hates its age, is morbidly obsessed with the self, and suffers from 'une impossibilité d'assumer le réel'. (2)

But in actual fact a work like A vau-l'eau already shows that naturalism's conception of the real is far more ambiguous: the substance of the world seems hostile, corrupt and indigestible; the hero struggles in vain to come to terms with the biological processes which determine existence; at the same time, the attempt to 'photograph' reality in literary terms produces a type of writing which far from being 'transparent' is often highly baroque and stylised. In other words, the polarisation of different tendencies suggests changes of position which may be conveniently abrupt but which really fail to account for the transformation which takes place in Huysmans' works in the 1880s.

As some recent commentators on turn-of-the-century French literature point out, generalising labels like naturalism, symbolism or decadence merely give an imprecise description of tendencies which coexist and overlap in specific works. (3)

A glance at Zola's La Curée, Paul Alexis' Madame Meuriot, Jean Lorrain's Monsieur de Phocas, or almost any novel by Octave Mirbeau, will reveal that the study of contemporary society and manners can be combined with more 'decadent' motifs (perverted sexuality, the macabre, the extremes of experiences), or vice versa. In A rebours, the quest for personal fulfilment through various forms of excess obviously dislodges social reportage from the centre of the novel. To quote Raimond again, 'le roman de la quête intellectuelle remplaçait le roman de l'enquête sociale'. (4) Nevertheless, despite his isolation from modern society or nature, des Esseintes

is forced to come to terms with both: his retreat is merely apparent, and in a way the book contains as much serious reflexion on society as any fictionalised 'procès-verbal'.

In his 'Discussion sur le naturalisme français', H.A. Hatzfeld outlines the primitive aspects of this type of writing, its obsession with birth, death and sexuality, an obsession which tends to be expressed in pathological, rather than moral or mythic, terms. He adds:

Il faut remarquer cependant, que la préoccupation scientifique n'est qu'à la superficie du naturalisme. Dans le subconscient, il y a l'obsession de la fatalité de la maladie. Cela peut être prouvé par le grand métaphorisme maladif. (5)

Sickness, disintegration and decay seem to be an inherent part of the naturalist vision (Hatzfeld cites the crumbling château in En rade as an example of this metaphorical process). Appropriately enough, such biological themes play an important part in A rebours. On the one hand, the struggle to control or resist the environment (external nature) is developed much more fully than in previous works; while at the same time des Esseintes is sapped from within by the attack of that mysterious force called 'la névrose', which combines heredity and milieu, physiological and moral elements in its ingredients. Furthermore, the horrific appearance of the Pox in the nightmare in chapter eight seems to reaffirm the view that humanity is fatally tainted at the very heart of its biological sources.

Yet so many aspects of A rebours seem totally alien to naturalism, whether one takes Les Soeurs Vatar, L'Assommoir, or L'Éducation sentimentale as models of the genre. All of des Esseintes' preoccupations, moral, social, aesthetic, or sadistic, do indeed seem to burst out of the limits of the genre, to return to a

broadier tradition. As Marc Fumaroli puts it, between A van-l'eau and A rebours we move 'de la comédie picaresque "naturaliste", au drame héroï-comique "romantique"', (6) particularly if we recall Baudelaire's definition of romanticism in the 'Salon de 1846' as 'art moderne, c'est-à-dire intimité, spiritualité, couleur, aspiration vers l'infini, exprimées par tous les moyens que contiennent les arts'. (7) Conducted on general lines like this, however, the argument about whether Huysmans rejects, continues, or expands the naturalist novel whose conventions he had previously followed, runs the risk of simply going round in circles; it is already clear that some aspects of A rebours seem rooted in the naturalist vision, while others leave it behind. Does this lead to a discontinuity in the novel itself? How far do the character des Esseintes, the message and structure of the novel represent a radical innovation in Huysmans' fictional world and naturalist fiction? The rest of this chapter will try to discuss these questions more specifically.

Des Esseintes, 'ce flottant personnage (...), chrétien et pédéraste, impuissant et crédule'. Thus Huysmans describes his aristocratic hero in an apologetic letter to Zola of 25 May 1884. (8) This strange combination of attributes -- the character is both a Christian and a credulous unbeliever, a debauchee and impotent -- suggests, quite intentionally perhaps, the air of mystification and outrageousness which A rebours exudes. The author's attempt to explain, or explain away, his novel to Zola is itself a piece of diplomatic duplicity, adding to the confusion. If we believe what he says, Huysmans is as perverse a creature as des Esseintes, for he maintains (apropos of the discussion of literature in the novel):

j'ai jeté à l'eau mes idées personnelles et ai exprimé des idées diamétralement opposées aux miennes qu'il ne pourra venir à personne l'idée de m'attribuer, puisque j'ai écrit tout le contraire dans L'Art Moderne. J'ai déclaré qu'il préférerait la Tentation à l'Éducation, la Faustine à Germinie, la Faute de l'abbé Mouret à l'Assommoir - Ça c'est clair - et cette antipode absolue de mes préférences m'a permis d'émettre des idées vraiment malades et de célébrer la gloire de Mallarmé ce qui m'a semblé être d'une assez affable blague! (9)

However spurious this denial may be (in a letter to Paul Bourget about L'Art moderne, published the year before A rebours in 1883, Huysmans categorically rejects Zola's ideas and his brand of naturalism), (10) what is significant in these remarks is the author's desire to dissociate himself entirely from his character: for Huysmans, des Esseintes is both perverse or even grotesque ('chrétien et pédéraste'), and also unstable and diffuse ('flottant'). In fact the whole book suffers from a certain incoherence, he says: 'C'était trop complexe et trop diffus, par la donnée même'. (11) At the same time, however, he admits that des Esseintes has been a vehicle for expressing certain ideas -- even if these ideas are crazy, merely a 'joke', supposedly quite the opposite of his personal feelings.

We are given due warning, then, to avoid a facile identification of author and character. Léon Bloy's comment in his review of A rebours that des Esseintes 'n'est que le prête-nom littéraire de l'auteur' is too sweeping a judgement, failing to do justice to des Esseintes's substance as a purely literary creation. Similarly, Barbey d'Aurevilly rejects des Esseintes as a physiological portrait, dismissing him as a 'mécanique détraquée'. (12) For both these 'Catholic' commentators, A rebours is an autobiographical statement, the product of a spiritual struggle, the outcome of which is far more important than 'literature'. 'Une mortelle angoisse

se dégage de son livre' writes Barbey. Des Esseintes alias Huysmans is 'anxieux d'une Essence supérieure', says Eloy in a happy phrase.

Doubtless such statements are true in the widest sense. A rebours is more than a series of jokes and boutades strung together by fine writing and does present an existential quest of a sort. As a modern critic says, 'Huysmans avait chargé son personnage de toute son inquiétude métaphysique', (13) and evidently there is a parallel between the hero and his creator. But to make a direct association between the two is insufficient: not only is des Esseintes a 'character' in his own right, whose behaviour has little to do with Huysmans', but also Huysmans makes a rigorous attempt within the text to cover his tracks, to place des Esseintes in a position of uncertainty and to ironise his behaviour, so that the alleged authorial disguise does indeed serve a literal purpose, of concealing rather than revealing Huysmans' exact opinion of his character. (14)

This last point helps explain perhaps why various critics have struggled in a rather contradictory way to interpret A rebours either as parody or as autobiography. (15) Des Esseintes too is an essentially ambiguous figure, or rather he splits into two different halves. On the one hand, he is the individual whose fictional biography A rebours recounts, a figure which soon however seems considerably larger than life in its excesses and eccentricities. On the other hand, his project or adventure tends to invade and overwhelm his particularity: he becomes, not a 'mouthpiece' for the author (whose own views remain shrouded), but a pretext or reflector for speculations which encompass wide areas of experience and culture. Des Esseintes is both a character, even a hero perhaps in his tragi-comic struggle against the world, and

also a function, a focal point for the other preoccupations the text discloses.

In his second role, des Esseintes does sometimes slip entirely out of sight: he is subsumed by that narrative voice which enumerates at perhaps rather excessive length a series of opinionated lectures on Latin literature, jewels, perfumes and so forth, even if on other occasions the narrator may distance himself from the hero. Even in his first role, des Esseintes's identity proves to be rather unstable. As D. Grojnowski points out in a perceptive article, des Esseintes even as a physical being is a sort of space or battlefield passively possessed by a succession of sensations and maladies:

Des Esseintes est une sorte de pantin qui incarne une symptomatologie: scrofule, chlorose, léthargie, hallucinations, impuissance. (16)

In his account of des Esseintes's illness, Huysmans leant heavily on contemporary medical treatises (as he admits in the letter to Zola already quoted), and this, together with the insistence on heredity in the Notice to the book and elsewhere, suggests affinities with the mechanistic psychology and 'experimental novel' preached by Zola. (17) Des Esseintes demonstrates the play of various symptoms and pre-determined forces, and in fact, in Grojnowski's view, seems to exist only through them:

Le moi n'est plus postulé comme entité homogène, il est le lieu de fluctuations qui mettent en question ses fondements théoriques: le personnage en crise porte témoignage d'une crise de la notion de personne. (18)

This dissolution of the self, springing from naturalist determinism, looks forward to Proust or to certain modern views of the self as an area in which language is enacted. (19) According to Grojnowski, A rebours is a 'roman-fleuve de l'investigation de soi et du vide

intérieur'. (20) Des Esseintes fills in this inner void by living off sensation, and by the various decorative projects he undertakes.

Certainly, this vertiginous fear of the void seems to lurk behind the frenetic indulgence of some of des Esseintes's activities. (21) The perverted idealism of the 'decadent' text often seems to be a reaction against this horrified sense of emptiness: in Jean Lorrain's story 'Les Trous du masque' (which provides an archetypal example), the mask is discovered to conceal -- nothing. The masked characters glimpsed by the hero in a half-world exist only as masks, as surface and décor. (22) But in A rebours one feels that des Esseintes still keeps a certain substance and remains a tangible entity. Interesting though Grojnowski's interpretation is, it verges on contradiction. If the self dissolves into external impulses, how can it be 'investigated'? If des Esseintes is a 'puppet', is it legitimate to describe him as the 'hero'? The most apparent mark of his identity is, of course, his name.

According to Roland Barthes:

Un nom propre doit toujours être interrogé soigneusement, car le nom propre est, si l'on peut dire, le prince des signifiants; ses connotations sont riches, sociales et symboliques. (23)

This interrogation may smack of the arbitrary or fanciful: thus the Z of Loti's novel Aziyadé is a 'caress', whereas in S/Z it is transmuted to 'la lettre de la mutilation... cinglant à la façon d'un fouet châtieur'! (24) At the beginning of his otherwise excellent article on A rebours, Grojnowski interrogates the name duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes, discovering the letters 'SADE'. (25) (A more sceptical interrogation also finds 'ASS' and 'CON'....) (26) The Christian name Jean is also significant, suggesting a

dédoublément with the two Saint Johns referred to in the book: des Esseintes is 'le saint à rebours', says Grojnowski. (27) Evidently, such interpretations, whatever their appeal, are really imposed on the text rather than discovered within it.

This is not to say that names are not highly charged:

De fait, le lecteur a presque toujours tendance à isoler, à l'intérieur du nom propre, des radicaux, suffixes, préfixes, morphèmes divers qu'il analysera, par rétroaction, en fonction du signifié du personnage ou qui, inversement, lui serviront, s'il les reconnaît d'emblée, de référence prospective, d'horizon d'attente pour 'prévoir' le personnage... (28)

Nevertheless, a certain caution seems called for, particularly as Huysmans had the habit of picking the names of his characters virtually at random in a gazetteer or railway timetable, in the hope of protecting himself from the libel actions which Zola had suffered from. (29) That he had done this in A rebours is shown by Meurgey de Tupigny in a brochure entitled 'Le Sentiment héraldique dans l'oeuvre de J.-K. Huysmans' (1946). Floressas des Esseintes

n'est pas un nom ducal, c'est un nom de fermier général qui serait d'origine quercynoise, par le patronyme: Floressas est le nom d'une commune du Lot. Quant au nom de terre: des Esseintes, c'est celui d'une petite localité de la Gironde. J'avoue que cet assemblage déconcerte un peu. (30)

No doubt Huysmans' solecisms in this domain are excusable, and it is appropriate that a hero 'anxieux d'une Essence supérieure' has a name fitting his yearning (Esseintes - Essences). But surely what is most immediately apparent about the name is also most interesting: the aristocratic title shows a rise in the social standing of Huysmans' character which would appear to imply a radical change of perspective. The domestic themes which bulk so large in A vu-l'eau or En ménage are removed at a stroke by des Esseintes's income of 50,000 francs a year (in 1884, Huysmans

himself earned 3,600 francs per annum), (31) or, to be more exact, are expressed in new terms. The starting point of A rebours is the conclusion of En ménage and A vau-l'eau: these last two works end with the protagonists' renunciation of their aspirations, their submission to social conformity (marriage for André) or the 'stream of life' (Folantin metaphorically sets himself 'adrift'), and the pressures against which these characters struggle in vain are both symbolically and literally expressed, within the realistic context imposed by naturalism, in domestic terms (obtaining lodgings, food, a household companion). In the Notice to A rebours des Esseintes rapidly goes through a similar cycle of social frustration, but while Folantin and André are unable to escape the vicious circle in which they are trapped by their contradictory desire both to resist the social (or biological) world and yet also to be integrated into it (through food or women), the Duke, liberated from bourgeois constraints, makes the decision to remove himself entirely from society and re-create the world in a more amiable image. This project, consisting as it does of furnishing a house, establishing a routine for its organisation, might be seen in concrete terms as a domestic enterprise: but domesticity has clearly been re-defined. Des Esseintes boldly rejects the sexual or emotional problems that torment André and Folantin and tie them to society; his impotence indicates a refusal of desire, of the Other. An early title for the novel was simply Soul -- the reversal of En ménage.

Of course in the long term this striving for autonomy fails. In the last chapter, des Esseintes is driven back to society, and consequently the book seems finally to revert to the terms of the two preceding works. Moreover, it can be argued that des Esseintes's isolation is in reality always spurious. What should be stressed at

this point, however, concerning the character's name and standing, is that Huysmans does rather more than simply arbitrarily endow the protagonist with a particule and a large income. A rebours displays an aristocratic posture not possible in the earlier works, where the characters' actions are largely conditioned by their bourgeois status. The painter Cyprien, for example, may see himself as a Bohemian, a déclassé: but in the eyes of his working-mistress Céline Vatard, he is a 'gentleman', both in appearance (his dress) and in the condescending way he treats her. He is a member of the dominant social class who, symbolically perhaps, keeps a working-class rival at bay with a loaded stick. Again, in A van-l'eau the functionary Folantin is nearly always referred to with mocking dignity as Monsieur Folantin, the title of his class. When a character similar to Folantin, the retired civil servant in La Retraite de M. Bougran, attempts to accede to the autonomy of a des Esseintes, the story appears as a burlesque parody of A rebours: the elements of fantasy and the absurd which are kept under control in the novel dominate the story.

The aristocratic mentality is then an important invention in A rebours. Huysmans' analysis of the aristocracy in the final chapter and at the beginning of the novel concludes that as a class it is decadent. In its traditional role, it is above the rest of society; in the contemporary world where it no longer has a vital function, it is outside society. Both these positions are reflected in des Esseintes's isolated disdain, as he looks down on the world from Fontenay-aux-Roses. His aesthetic tastes as well seem founded on a preference for what is non-utilitarian, unknown, unpolluted and unsanctioned by public choice. At the same time, this 'decadence', given concrete form in la névrose.

is what destroys him: the oppressive weight of those ancestors assembled in the family portrait gallery proves inescapable.

Thus des Esseintes breaks the social barriers which surround Huysmans' other characters. One might add that he also begins to break some of the barriers that constrain humanity generally. While his predecessor Folantin is a character who is belittled, made ridiculous by those around him, physically disabled, perpetually defeated, des Esseintes moves in the other direction, towards the monstrous, the larger than life. It is significant that in La-bas the child-murderer and satanist Gilles de Rais is described as 'le Des Esseintes du quinzième siècle' (I,77). Des Esseintes's cruelty may be limited to a rather comical attempt to commit murder by proxy (chapter six),(32) to sadistic reveries, and enthusiastic advocacy of large-scale abortion (chapter thirteen), but like Gilles de Rais he lives according to a doctrine of excess, striving to deny biological necessity. (33) While the Maréchal de Rais tries to change the conditions of existence by seeking the philosopher's stone, des Esseintes practises a personal alchemy, using the imagination to overcome 'la vulgaire réalité des faits' (p.33).

Under such circumstances, attempts to make the hero of A rebours Huysmans' alter ego in any literal sense are particularly absurd. Far from being the decadent poseur one might guess him to be, if one knew only A rebours. Huysmans outside his literary activities seemed quite content to lead a perfectly mundane existence, far removed from the flamboyant antics of such contemporary writers as Jean Lorrain, ether-addict and flagrant homosexual (he dubbed himself 'l'enfilanthrope'), Pierre Loti with his penchant for wearing make-up and exotic costumes, such as the dress of an Egyptian pharaoh, or the self-proclaimed Magus, the 'Sâr' Joséphin

Péladan (nicknamed 'Le Mage d'Épinal' and 'Le Sâr pédalant' by his enemies). Nor was the dandyish Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac flattered at being taken as the model for des Esseintes. Thanks to an account given him by Mallarmé, Huysmans made considerable use of the furnishings in Montesquiou's famous apartment on the quai d'Orsay when fitting out des Esseintes's imaginary residence; but otherwise A rebours seems to have influenced Montesquiou as much as the reverse, at least in a negative sense, since the aristocratic poet made considerable efforts to display his literary and social talents, repressing his homosexual leanings, precisely in order to combat the supposed portrait Huysmans had painted of him in the novel. (34)

Des Esseintes's aristocratic and monstrous characteristics make him a radically different figure from Durtal. Des Esseintes is aptly described by Gallot as 'un enfant tyrannique qui joue au démiurge'. (35) On the one hand, his enterprise is indeed an attempt to recreate the laws of existence: imagination and artifice supposedly replace nature. Yet on the other, his activities are pushed to such extremes that they verge on the petulantly absurd. Des Esseintes's inversion of norms often seems designed as much for shock effect as anything else. Thus the mechanism of his reflections on Latin literature seems in large part to consist of maintaining the exact opposite of received opinion. An event like the 'repas de deuil' combines imaginative zest with an expanded schoolboyish prank. Finally, in any case, des Esseintes fails and is left praying for consolation from the 'vieil espoir' offered by Christianity.

All the same, despite the elements of the burlesque which rather sardonically undermine des Esseintes's status as a heroic

figure (he is no Faust), (36) despite his final collapse, it should not be forgotten that many of his ventures are, in the short term, perfectly successful: he does play his mouth-organ of liqueurs with marvellous dexterity, or create a world of perfumes with alchemical skill, or enjoy the rainy pleasures of London without moving from Paris (chapters four, ten, eleven). Though one can argue that his enterprise contains an inherent contradiction and is therefore bound to fail, what most obviously causes des Esseintes's downfall is the attack of the disease which Huysmans calls 'la névrose'. The Duke's nervous disorders are mentioned from the beginning (Notice p.11), but first appear as a menacing force half-way through the book, in chapter seven, when des Esseintes's enforced solitude causes a loss of control: he is overwhelmed by memories, re-living his entire existence (p.112), feeding on his own substance like a hibernating animal. This self-sufficiency is presented in a negative light ('ce confinement contre nature où il s'entêtait', p.117): des Esseintes is not liberating but destroying himself.

Les excès de sa vie de garçon, les tensions exagérées de son cerveau, avaient singulièrement aggravé sa névrose originelle, amoindri le sang déjà usé de sa race... (p.129)(37)

Like Original Sin, neurosis seems to be imposed on the character by the weight of past events outside his control; a pseudo-medical vocabulary ('the worn-out blood of his race') replaces the religious terminology, as it does in Zola's conception of inherited diseases which determine behaviour. (38)

The exact nature of this neurosis is hard to define. Like syphilis, it is a sinister force submerged within the organism, which from time to time emerges in a variety of symptoms, attacking both on a physical and moral level. Ultimately,

des Esseintes is warned by his doctor, at the end of chapter fifteen, his 'neurosis' will kill him, unless he seeks radical treatment. (39) A modern dictionary may define 'névrose' as an emotional disorder which disturbs the patient's behaviour (anguish, phobias, etc.) without damaging the integrity of his mental functions, (40) but evidently such an explanation is totally inadequate in the case of A rebours. The comparison with syphilis is not gratuitous. In fact, in chapter eight, des Esseintes has a nightmarish vision of syphilis embracing and killing him. Disease pervades the whole of A rebours, and this nightmare, appearing at the centre of the book, seems a symbolic comment on the 'biological' motif (man's relationship to nature) which is at the heart of the novel. (41) Throwing aside the rather laborious documentary guise under which he presents neurosis (although, as suggested, documents do little to explain it), Huysmans presents syphilis in a much more potent and horrific form in the fantastic personification which appears to des Esseintes in his dream.

The nightmare is of course prepared at the beginning of the chapter. Des Esseintes has acquired a collection of exotic flowers, whose main attribute, following his principle of inversion, is meant to be to appear artificial although they are real (p.134). In fact, the gruesome catalogue of these blooms soon indicates that, far from being an ironical reflection of the man-made in nature (nature imitating culture, whereas ordinary artificial flowers show culture imitating nature), they are hideously real, showing a nature which is obscenely exposed and diseased. Des Esseintes admits grudgingly that nature

Quand elle n'avait pu imiter l'oeuvre humaine, (...) avait été réduite à recopier les membranes intérieures des animaux, à emprunter les vivaces teintes de leurs chairs en pourriture, les magnifiques horreurs de leurs gangrènes.

Tout n'est que syphilis, songea des Esseintes... (p.141)(42)

His vision of the human species ravaged throughout time by 'l'inusable héritage, l'éternelle maladie' (p.141) is followed by the dream in which he himself falls victim to 'la grande Vérole'.

Desbrières says that 'le fantastique (...) est toujours qu'on le veuille ou non l'extériorisation d'une angoisse'. (43) The nightmare does not have an intrusive effect in the text, since the fantastic or oneiric has already been well established thanks to des Esseintes's morbid predilections and memories: the account of his picture gallery in chapter five already introduces 'un fantastique de maladie et de délire' (p.97); similarly, his recollection of a visit to the dentist in chapter four is nearer a comic nightmare than the banal contingencies of the everyday. Consequently, one is indeed tempted to see in this dream, not a sudden break with the waking-world, but a concentrated, potent expression of the anguish beneath the surface of the whole novel. Des Esseintes's conclusion, as he escapes from sleep, 'Ah! ce n'est, Dieu merci, qu'un rêve' (p.149), is contradicted by the experience of the rest of the book; the dream serves, not as a painful interlude, but as a lesson.

The erotic content of the nightmare is quite evident. If the Pox first appears undisguised, as a sinister, sexless figure on horseback, and des Esseintes flees it in horror, the second appearance, of a naked woman clad only in green silk stockings, is more ambiguous. She too seems to be an incarnation of the Pox; her skin is covered with coppery blotches; her eyes, like those of the rider, 'd'un bleu clair et froid, terribles'

(p.148, cf. p.144), hypnotically attract des Esseintes, despite his repulsion; between her thighs blossoms 'le farouche Midularium qui bâillait, en saignant, dans des lames de sabre' (p.149). Woman does not merely transmit disease, but becomes the disease, transformed into the flower which reveals the destructive onslaught of nature on man, a nature which man is forced to embrace. In chapter five of A rebours, Salomé, the incarnation of feminine sexual evil (p.84), is also called a 'grande fleur vénérienne' (p.89).

In an interesting article M. Collomb interprets this nightmare in terms of femininity and inversion. (44) At the beginning of the dream, des Esseintes is accompanied by a strange Bulldog-Woman, whom he fails to recognise and yet who seems to be intimately associated with him. During their flight from the Pox, she loses her teeth, and finally he strangles her to keep her quiet. Collomb suggests that she is a projection of des Esseintes's femininity, which he tries in vain to suppress. As for the missing teeth, one is tempted to pass this off as whimsy, (45) though there is perhaps a recollection of the dentist scene (as Collomb remarks), when des Esseintes is operated on, penetrated by the dentist, tortured, just as he is by the Femme-Fleur. Obviously his sexuality is disturbed (to say the least), but Collomb's attempt to suggest there is a certain sexual ambivalence in the final scene of the dream seems very odd. This critic argues that the Midularium, which castrates the hero, might indicate a sodomy fantasy, and that the fatal embrace somehow fulfils the androgynous fantasy which des Esseintes fails to achieve in real life with the muscular lady-acrobat Miss Urania. Thus the nightmare

dessine au centre géométrique du roman la figure la plus radicale de l'A Rebours, celle de l'inversion sexuelle. (46)

Why the Nidularium should represent anything other than the female sexual organs seems mysterious. A certain ambivalence is certainly suggested by the appearance of the Amorphophalluses (whose stems resemble 'des membres endommagés de nègre', p.137).(47) However, these assault the woman and not des Esseintes; he in fact pushes away 'ces tiges tièdes et fermes' (p.148) with disgust. But Collomb's interpretation is most disappointing because it seems to reduce the luxurious fascination with horror, the imaginative exuberance of this lurid fantasy based on the fundamental themes of disease, death and sexuality (this chapter of A rebours is unlikely to seem 'dated' at least) to an expression of repressed homosexuality.

A similar interpretation of A rebours is put forward by

J. Meyers and seems somewhat glibly reductive:

Moreau's and Huysmans' common fascination with the 'more cordial epoch' of Salome springs from their fear of women and their homosexual proclivities. For Des Esseintes' escape from reality, from the whole world of ordinary existence, is really a rejection of women and an escape from sexuality, from what Huysmans calls whoring women and fornicating men. (48)

Meyers' insinuation that misogyny is equivalent to veiled homosexuality is misleading: des Esseintes does not reject women because he prefers men. If he is seen, in the account of his sexual adventures in chapter nine, to move from women to the androgynous fantasy with Miss Urania, and finally, quite explicitly, to pederasty, this is not because he has discovered his true vocation, but rather because he is searching for a form of experience novel and exciting enough to overcome his impotence. The androgynous fantasy seems to indicate less a secret attraction towards his own sex than a desire to escape

the limitations of the self by taking on a female sexual identity; it is a form of idealism. (49) It seems unnecessarily restrictive to limit the rejection expressed in the novel to a refusal of heterosexual relations, as Meyers does. Sexual inversion besides is simply one figure in a whole pattern of inversion. It is debatable whether it is the most 'radical' (as Collomb maintains) -- one could argue that des Esseintes's use of enemas is much more inventively 'unnatural', for instance.

Des Esseintes's impotence is presented at the beginning of the book as part of a general loss of appetite ('ses sens tombèrent en léthargie', p.12), appropriately consecrated by the repas de deuil in chapter one which signals his renunciation of the pleasures of the flesh. His recollections in chapter nine show that only greater and greater appeals to the imagination could temporarily forestall his affliction (with the examples of Miss Urania, the ventriloquist, and the unnamed youth demonstrating the novelty value of the abnormal). Finally, however, impotence seems to be due to a total separation of body and mind: 'l'effervescence de sa cervelle ne fondait plus les glaces de son corps' (p.163). One recalls the trenchant comments about sex made by Baudelaire in Mon coeur mis à nu:

Plus l'homme cultive l'art, moins il bande.
Il se fait un divorce de plus en plus sensible entre
l'esprit et la brute.
La brute seule bande bien, et la fouterie est le
lyrisme du peuple.
Fouter, c'est aspirer à entrer dans un autre, et l'artiste
ne sort jamais de lui-même. (50)

The last sentence in particular seems an excellent comment on des Esseintes's solipsistic venture; he refuses intercourse of any sort. But in fact A rebours sets out to demonstrate that the duality Baudelaire apparently establishes between, on one side,

art, the artist, and spirit, and on the other, the copulating brute, the promiscuity of the people, is destructive. Aesthetic or spiritual experience cannot be cut off from the physical: both the nightmare and the neurosis show the revenge nature takes on des Esseintes.

Des Esseintes does indeed want to escape from the 'brute', as manifested by his own senses or by other people, into a sort of primeval retreat at Fontenay ('Ses idées de se blottir, loin du monde, de se calfeutrer dans une retraite, d'assourdir (...) le vacarme roulant de l'inflexible vie', p.12). The nightmare provides a symbolic commentary on what it is he rejects. Des Esseintes certainly rejects women: the sexual act leads to emasculation, if not to death. At the same time, woman appears as the vehicle or rather the source (since the Pox merges with the woman) of the disease that has wracked humanity throughout time. Fertility and reproduction are irrevocably tainted; the act of generating the species brings with it the degeneration and death of the species. (51) No wonder des Esseintes refuses the biological impulse, the propagation of the race, in his tirade on birth-control in chapter thirteen. But at the same time, the dream shows that despite his terror des Esseintes is hypnotically attracted towards the woman: one cannot refuse the 'brute' which is an essential part of the organism.

The neurosis seems to make much the same point, in a parallel but diluted way. (52) Des Esseintes's attempt to escape the social or biological world only makes him more vulnerable to the hereditary curse within him (both syphilis and neurosis are passed down through the generations), which begins to destroy his whole organism through a varied series of

symptoms. (53) Just as his enforced chastity produces febrile cerebral obsessions (causing virtual collapse at the end of chapter nine), so more generally the attempt to cut off body from mind leads to a loss of mental control (the onslaught of memories in chapter seven, hallucinations of smell and hearing in chapters ten and fifteen) and collapse (the end of chapter ten). Neurosis represents far more than a nervous disorder: essentially it seems to be a metaphor for the fundamental sickness Huysmans and the naturalists see in man and nature.

'Névrose' may well seem a misleading term for this pessimistic fatalism which expresses itself through pathology. In En rade, for example, Louise is attacked by 'neurosis' (e.g. En rade, p.93), though the symptoms described are actually those of general paralysis of the insane. (54) On the other hand, the mysterious nature of this affliction perhaps makes it all the more fearsome. Both body and spirit are inexplicably possessed by a variety of ailments whose cause remains enigmatic. In the preface to A rebours of 1903, Huysmans even speculates at the possibility of diabolic agency behind the patient's state of mind (p.xvi). 'Névrose' was of course a highly fashionable illness at the end of the nineteenth century, part of a general obsession with degeneration and decadence. (55) Octave Mirbeau remarks in his aptly named satirical novel Les 21 Jours d'un neurasthénique (1901) that neurasthenia is 'la maladie du siècle'; in the manner of the much derided Max Nordau, a 'doctor Triceps' absurdly reduces all aspects of humanity, from genius to poverty, to neurosis: 'Névrose! névrose! névrose!... Tout est névrose!...' (56) According to Jacques Lethève, 'névrose' was given its literary fashionableness by the Goncourts and shown

to be the curse which hung over the 'artist' separated from the 'brute':

La névrose, maladie d'un siècle raffiné, n'est pas le triste lot d'individus tarés, mais l'apanage des hommes d'esprit les plus représentatifs. (...) par une sorte de contradiction, leur état constitue à la fois un signe d'élection et de malheur. (57)

In A rebours, though primarily a symbol of the hero's struggle with nature or biology, neurosis can also be related to des Esseintes's aristocratic posture; the aristocrat's spiritual refinement is concomitant with the physiological exhaustion of his race. In more general terms, of course, decadence as analysed by, say, Paul Bourget is not merely a medical or aesthetic phenomenon, but has social and political causes. One of the successes of A rebours, one might well argue, is its statement of an ideology of decadence -- 'Jamais renseignement plus formidable ne fut donné sur une société' observed Barbey d'Aurevilly. (58)

To recapitulate some of the points made so far in this attempt to define the character des Esseintes, we have seen that, whatever the message of A rebours and its relation to Huysmans' artistic and spiritual development may be, the hero of the novel is a substantial fictional creation and certainly not a projection or copy of the author or some such figure as Robert de Montesquiou. His name and social status show Huysmans' wish to create a character both superior to and removed from ordinary society, from the day-to-day existence with whose problems the protagonists of his earlier naturalist fiction struggle in vain. The aristocrat -- the usual protagonist for tragedy -- is removed from the trivial limitations which inhibit the movements of the lower classes; without his relative social autonomy, des Esseintes's

striving for cultural or biological autonomy against the nineteenth-century bourgeois world would merely seem absurd (witness M. Bougran). Although des Esseintes is clearly a vehicle for Huysmans' encyclopedic discourse on sundry matters, the insistence on his physiological being as the victim of 'la névrose' does, one might say, make him very much a creature of 'flesh and blood'. A commentator like Grojnowski, however, argues that even in this very physical domain, des Esseintes becomes an empty space which the author fills with a list of symptoms culled from medical treatises. Nevertheless, des Esseintes does impress the reader as a figure of some potency; his gestures of defiance, the inventive eccentricity of his behaviour, make him more than a 'puppet', but this mixture of the heroic and the burlesque certainly removes him from the human and he verges on the monstrous.

Huysmans' account of the character's neurosis shows that man cannot escape physiology. If des Esseintes's projects and interests are almost totally removed from the concerns of naturalism, if his solipsistic attempt to make external reality subsidiary to his private needs seems a deliberate reversal of the relationship between the individual and the world presented in most naturalist novels (where the individual is absorbed by his environment), 'la névrose', on the contrary, by which des Esseintes is possessed through a hereditary fatality, seems to encapsulate perfectly the biological, pathological impulse which is a crucial element of naturalism, interpreting and expressing nature in metaphors of sickness and degeneration. This is the force to which des Esseintes succumbs: the idealist-cum-dandy is brought down by nature, by naturalism in fact. Des Esseintes certainly fails to reconcile these contradictory impulses (on one side, we have the individual,

the aesthete, the spirit, on the other, society, the world, nature), and the debate with which Huysmans opens La-bas seven years later suggests that he himself had yet to find a solution to his polarisation of naturalism and 'spiritualism'.

Des Esseintes becomes, then, a battleground in the author's own attempt to go beyond the terms of naturalism. If at first des Esseintes seems to be embarking on a radically new way of life, compared with Huysmans' previous heroes, finally the Duke is left as beaten and drained as Polantin and André. In similar fashion, we can recall Zola's warning to Huysmans that his eccentric novel had exhausted a whole area of fiction in one attempt, that his forces were spent, and that he should return to an 'étude de mœurs' (preface to A rebours, p.xxii). Appropriately enough, Huysmans next produced what is on one level a caustic account of peasant life, En rade. Whatever the repercussions of des Esseintes's venture on Huysmans' eventual return to Catholicism (outlined by the author himself in the preface of 1903), another parallel can be established, in terms of literature rather than biography, between the hero's struggles and those of the author with what Valéry called 'l'épopée de l'aventure stylistique'. We can see why Huysmans felt he was in a literary impasse before writing A rebours: while the whole of En ménage or A vue-l'eau is given over to a demonstration of the inadequacies of the world in which the characters move, the failure inherent in the naturalist presentation of life is established immediately in the prologue to A rebours. The social world which the naturalist novel describes in all its ramifications is simply rejected, as fit only for fools and villains; the biological world, which determines

the existence of individuals within this society, is shown to function according to a process of irrevocable degeneration. The rest of A rebours is Huysmans' attempt to break out of these limits. Des Esseintes may fail, but does his creator? Is Huysmans brought low by the fatal weight of naturalist writing? Before discussing the writing and structure of the text of A rebours, we should perhaps describe in more detail the aesthetic enterprise undertaken by des Esseintes and the way this in turn reflects on Huysmans' own enterprise in writing the novel.

So far, des Esseintes has been observed as a social and physiological being, a narrative vehicle, and a grotesque. But he can also be defined in moral terms, as a rebel, an aesthete, a literary representation of that mythic figure whose career is charted by Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurevilly -- the dandy. Des Esseintes is one of a series of such nineteenth-century literary and historical personages as Brummell, Baudelaire's Samuel Cramer, Gautier's Fortunio, Lorrain's M. de Phocas. According to Michel Lemaire in his study of dandyism, A rebours 'trouve sa place centrale au carrefour du dandysme et de l'histoire littéraire'; it is 'la synthèse du dandysme décadent'. (59) Every serious commentator insists that the dandy is not simply an expression of exhibitionism or vanity, but is a metaphysical being, whose existence corresponds to a certain philosophy or ideology. Henri Lemaître summarises Baudelaire's definition of the dandy in 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne' as follows, for example:

pour Baudelaire, le dandysme n'est pas seulement une attitude, mais une véritable 'spiritualité', c'est-à-dire une affirmation, aristocratique et provocante, de l'âme face à un monde qui l'ignore et la bafoue: le dandysme

se justifie alors en donnant naissance à une éthique; d'où l'importance de la culture du beau; et ainsi, en Baudelaire, se rejoignent le dandy, le critique, et le poète. (60)

Dandyism is based on opposition and revolt; it is an attempt to establish a new aristocracy when the old is crumbling and democracy is not quite all-powerful, says Baudelaire. 'Le dandysme est le dernier éclat d'héroïsme dans les décadences.' (61) The dandy's elegance is merely one symbol of his aristocratic superiority. It is worth noting that, for this view, it is not the dandy, but the society against which he reacts, which is decadent.

The dandy may be ethically or aesthetically remote from society, but in the view of Barbey d'Aurevilly, in his essay on George Brummell, he functions within society, through 'sa vie publique... son rôle social'; 'Paraître, c'est être pour les Dandys, comme pour les femmes'. (62) The private misery behind these public appearances (Brummell ended up in a lunatic asylum) is of no interest: the dandy exists as a myth, is essentially inhuman:

Quand on meurt de faim, on sort des affectations d'une société quelconque, on rentre dans la vie humaine: on cesse d'être Dandy. (63)

But Brummell exists only as a dandy ('ôtez le Dandy, que reste-t-il de Brummell?') and as a social phenomenon: 'la conséquence d'un certain état de société', 'le produit d'une société qui s'ennuie'. (64) Barbey's dandy begins to seem a rather shadowy and unnecessarily restricted figure; he is less a man, than a series of gestures, a certain pose or attitude whose ephemeral manifestations cannot be recorded for posterity any more than those of an actor. Consequently we are given little idea of Brummell's charms or personality in this account. The dandy's rebelliousness is limited,

moreover, to a skilful manipulation of social customs and etiquette. His behaviour may be unexpected, but never becomes what Barbey calls 'eccentricity', for this is

une révolution individuelle contre l'ordre établi, quelquefois contre la nature: ici on touche à la folie. Le Dandysme, au contraire, se joue de la règle et pourtant la respecte encore... (65)

Barbey's dandy is not a libertine; he avoids the slavery of love (for even libertinage imposes certain constraints and commitments); indeed he is a sort of androgyne, 'd'un sexe intellectuel indécis'. (66)

This last trait in particular seems to distinguish Barbey's model from Baudelaire's version, for whom love and money play an important, though not exclusive, role ('l'amour est l'occupation naturelle des oisifs (...) l'argent est indispensable aux gens qui se font un culte de leurs passions'). (67) Baudelaire after all makes the archetypal libertine Don Juan represent the position of silent, aristocratic defiance in 'Don Juan aux enfers'. Whatever these differences, it seems clear, as Michel Lemaire suggests, that each individual dandy takes some references from the myth of dandyism and incorporates them into his personal life. Thus many of the characteristics already mentioned do help to illuminate the case of des Esseintes: a position of revolt (verging perhaps on mania); the attempt to establish a personal aesthetic; the refusal of sexual or human contact; an insistence on 'paraître' rather than 'être' -- demonstrated not so much by des Esseintes's personal toilet as by certain of his attempts at interior decoration, for instance. The bedroom disguised as a false monk's cell in chapter five does not simply reveal that des Esseintes wants to play at

being a monk while actually living in luxury (a rather childish way of concealing his real being beneath appearance), but an aesthetic pleasure in manipulating illusion for its own sake, in reversing the conventional relationship between appearance and reality. (Where cheap materials are normally used to imitate luxury, des Esseintes uses luxurious materials to create the impression of austerity and poverty.) (68) This cult of artifice may ultimately make its practitioner an artificial being: the posture of defiance may simply become posturing. Add to this the dandy's lack of all human sympathy, and he does perhaps become an inhuman figure, as Barbey d'Aurevilly says.

Yet the dandy's revolt is not meant to degenerate into flamboyant futility. Like the writer, he participates in what Lemaire calls the Promethean myth:

Le dandysme et l'écriture sont deux tentatives symétriques pour vivre la vie d'un personnage de roman, avec toute sa cohérence, son intensité, sa beauté, deux tentatives pour se créer un destin. Personne 'réelle' ou personnage de roman, le dandy sera toujours un personnage de création. (69)

However, des Esseintes's expression of independence proves to be somewhat limited; in fact, his attempt to 'create a destiny' is to a large extent socially determined. The dandy may place himself in opposition to a social world, but at the same time he is a function of this world.

The ambivalent nature of des Esseintes's project is evident from the beginning:

Déjà il rêvait à une thébaïde raffinée, à un désert confortable, à une arche immobile et tiède... (p.10)

The paradoxical juxtaposition of nouns which suggest barrenness, danger and asceticism with adjectives suggesting luxuriousness and security, might be partly explained by the protagonist's project of mischievous inversion. Objects are turned away from

their habitual function, and converted, or perverted, into various 'illustrative' roles: the monk's cell, the ecclesiastical vestments, the Thebaid do not reveal des Esseintes's belief in the rites of Christian legend (though a residue perhaps remains) but a desire to use the sacred as a decorative surface. What is also significant, however, is that des Esseintes's isolation is only partial; 'comfort' and 'refinement' come from a civilized society, not from the desert; his ark is firmly anchored, and he takes civilisation into it with him. Fontenay-aux-Roses is chosen as a retreat because of its proximity to Paris (p.13). In Grojnowski's opinion,

La solitude du héros ne procède pas seulement d'une névrose au sens clinique du terme, mais aussi d'une névrose idéologique découlant d'un constat de non-appartenance. (70)

In other words, des Esseintes is driven to anguished revolt because he has no positive social role; rather like the Marquis de Sade, he attempts to assert himself against a society which has, as it were, squeezed him out. (71) The infantile nature of some of his attitudes stems perhaps from an (unconscious) resentment at being rejected. Society in fact virtually ignores des Esseintes throughout A rebours, whereas the solitary Duke never stops fulminating against it, and planning his 'revenge' by creating a murderer, preaching abortion, and so on. He is destroyed, moreover, not by social pressure from without, but by his inability to survive cut off from the restorative forces of the social or 'natural' world. Huysmans himself makes a similar point to Grojnowski in a passage in Certains (1889): with a certain bitter irony, he applies Taine's doctrines of social determinism à rebours and presents the figure of the 'poète maudit' as a logical product of social laws (Certains, p.20). In a sense then, des Esseintes does not choose to leave society, but is pushed out. We observe him constantly

looking back at society, vengefully trying to assert an individual autonomy for which society has little use, but which itself is still highly dependent on society's proper functioning. If des Esseintes's retreat is expressed in these terms, it also becomes easier to explain some of the apparent contradictions in his behaviour.

Politically, his attitude seems close to that which Philippe Jullian attributes to the decadent poet Jean Lorrain: 'une sorte d'anarchisme de droite basé sur le mépris du capitalisme'. (72) Des Esseintes's own reflections on society, which occur several times throughout the novel and indicate how little he has actually abandoned the outside, oscillate between a tone of mystifying black humour and more serious criticism of social hypocrisy. Thus his attempt to train Auguste Langlois to attack society in chapter six seems mainly intended for comic shock effect; like Baudelaire in 'Assomons les pauvres!', Huysmans inverts in sadistic fashion the normal principles of charity ('Fais aux autres ce que tu ne veux pas qu'ils te fassent', p.110). The fact that des Esseintes returns from his sadistic recollections of this episode, which has besides a noticeable undertone of homosexuality, to reading a poem incongruously entitled 'De laude castitatis', also encourages us to see this episode as a macabre joke. And yet Huysmans draws a more serious moral: des Esseintes is merely imitating society itself, whose supposedly charitable ventures arouse desires in the poor which they are forbidden to fulfil; universal education thus increases moral suffering and stimulates hatred (p.111). (73) Similarly, the truculent bad taste of des Esseintes's thoughts on birth control in chapter thirteen ('il n'était point de ménage, si riche qu'il fût, qui ne confiât ses enfants à la lessive...', p.256) reveals, behind

this gruesome humour, a vision of universal misery, misery which controls on abortion merely perpetuate.

Yet despite this denunciation, des Esseintes's own world at Fontenay-aux-Roses can only function because society at large can afford to allow him an income of 50,000 francs a year (a dozen times Huysmans' own salary), to furnish him with luxury goods, servants, and so on. In no way does des Esseintes fend for himself materially. At times, he is actually prepared to praise the inventions of the industrial age: in, for example, his musings on railway engines (chapter two), or on perfume factories (chapter ten). This is no doubt because, as Roger Kempf says, the dandy is opposed, not to the actual inventions or discoveries of progress, but to the ideology normally associated with progress, 'le sot discours qui s'en empare'. (74) In the case of locomotives and perfumes, des Esseintes uses them as examples which illustrate his own philosophy; he is not interested in the railways as a form of transport or communication. In a similar way, Kempf suggests that the dandy's misogyny is essentially due to a refusal of the bourgeois ideology of sex. The dandy attacks women because

il est à craindre qu'elles ne perpétuent, par la maternité et l'éducation, les turpitudes de la morale bourgeoise. Incriminer, comme le fait Baudelaire, cette catégorie de la population, prend un sens précis dans une société qui célèbre l'instinct génésique. (75)

Though such an interpretation seems an inadequate explanation of either Baudelaire's or Huysmans' misogyny (the well-known comment in Mon coeur mis à nu, 'La femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable', (76) surely attacks nature as exemplified by woman, and not 'bourgeois morality'), Kempf's argument still helps suggest a point that will be developed later in this section, that des Esseintes's 'attack' on nature, like his retreat, is

in large part externally conditioned.

At first sight A rebours may well appear to be an excellent illustration of Lukács's argument in The Historical Novel that the post-1848 novel and in particular naturalism were unable to deal with the real historical problems of their age:

by restricting itself exclusively to the faithful reproduction of immediate reality naturalism robbed literature of its power to give a living and dynamic picture of the essential driving forces of history. (77)

Instead, 'brutality in the presentation of physical process, veiled by biological mysticism' comes to the fore; in Flaubert's Salammô, the 'chief issue', the social development of man, is submerged by decorative splendour and a complacent insistence on atrocity; in Maupassant's Une vie, the action, though set under the Restoration, is purely private. (78) This is no doubt because, as R. Terdiman puts it in his study of solipsism in the French novel, The Dialectics of Isolation, history after 1848 is no longer seen as 'the force that generates and reveals truth in the world'. (79) Terdiman continues Lukács's argument, trying to demonstrate how the retreat from history and the social process leads to an increasingly formalised, solipsistic type of fiction:

Des Esseintes objectifies tendencies toward inaction and toward the total interiorization of experience that were not fully realized in Flaubert. The break with the outside, with the world of concrete social reality, and the isolation of the hero are here virtually completed. Flaubert was still bitterly fighting the outside; but for Huysmans in this novel (or at least in some of its most important scenes) the outside simply becomes irrelevant.

Like Bouvard et Pécuchet, A rebours rejects the 'dialectic' between self and society:

In them, from different directions, the dialectic between the individual and his surroundings, between the inside and the outside, is finally abolished. They are among the first radically formalist works in modern fiction. (...) An entire literature about the creation of literature will follow from the failure of life outside, of which these books stand as early and prestigious indications. (80)

The more one thinks about Terdiman's remarks, however, the harder it becomes to accept them. He seems to assume that because des Esseintes tries to cut himself off from social reality, social reality therefore has no place in the novel; or that because des Esseintes's project is 'formalist', A rebours has no referential value.

Yet des Esseintes is no Robinson Crusoe. Whereas Michel Tournier's Robinson (in Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique, 1965) is totally isolated from Western society and culture and undergoes a complete metamorphosis (unlike Defoe's hero, who simply recreates a reduced version of Western culture on his island), des Esseintes is ultimately dependent on the world 'outside', both for his material resources, and also for the content of his aesthetic projects (art, literature, jewels, perfumes all come from the 'outside'). Obviously A rebours is not a political or documentary novel; but it seems to exemplify the very 'dialectic' that Terdiman claims it abolishes. Essentially, the novel demonstrates the interaction of contradictory forces that in the long term are shown to be inseparable (though admittedly at this point Huysmans does not offer a synthesis or solution to this conflict). The apparent separation of spirit and body, which are re-united destructively through 'la névrose', has been mentioned; the investigation of des Esseintes as dandy has shown that the dandy functions against society from within society -- des Esseintes's position of defiance can only exist if he has something to defy. He is not a hermit; he does not become a new man. If des Esseintes is 'alienated', Huysmans also presents the conditions and process of this alienation. Far from being 'irrelevant', the presence of the outside as a norm is vital to the key scenes of

A rebours: des Esseintes's London in chapter eleven, for example, is not simply imaginary, but comes to life through the reality of the Paris through which he travels, whose material presence is evoked with painstaking virtuosity. The nightmare shows besides how the outside irrupts into des Esseintes's world as a virulent, destructive force which he cannot resist. This brings us to a third expression of dialectical opposition in A rebours: des Esseintes may pretend to invert 'nature', but nature sooner or later gets the better of him. He attempts to absorb his surroundings into himself -- and fails.

Just as des Esseintes is opposed to nature (or at least thinks he is) and yet is, as a living organism, part of nature, so too he cannot escape the social process. As Paul Bourget says, 'les pires révoltes contre la nature sont emprisonnées dans la nature', (81) and,

Notre temps agit sur nous directement et indirectement, si l'on peut dire, et ceux qui le haïssent et s'efforcent de le fuir dans le paradis d'un songe, par cette haine même et par cette fuite lui appartiennent et manifestent quelque chose de lui. (82)

Robert Baldick's excellent English translation of A rebours is called Against Nature (Penguin 1959). Though this may seem preferable to Against the Grain (the title of earlier translations), it is potentially misleading: while A rebours suggests a project of opposition, based on perversion or inversion, Against Nature suggests total rejection. (83) Yet ultimately, as Bourget says, nature is always the arbiter of existence; consequently opposition can never become absolute revolt. Perhaps this is why an unfriendly critic like Jules Lemaitre dismisses A rebours as a 'gageure' -- seeing the book as a sort of perverse wager hanging on the edge of contradiction. (84) In fact, however, whatever the paradoxes

or contradictory impulses of des Esseintes's behaviour, Huysmans himself makes no pretence of demolishing 'nature'. In the end it is des Esseintes who is brought down and abandoned to his fate; his project is a failure.

But A rebours is not a doleful or sardonic account of failure (unlike En ménage or A van-l'eau). Its best episodes have a dense verbal texture and imaginative zest which is both inventive and outrageous. Huysmans terminates des Esseintes's aesthetic career (following the imperatives of nature and naturalism), but the real charm of the book lies in its unrolling of the hero's enterprise, his flagrant exploration of the limits of good taste, credibility and normality. Des Esseintes's project can perhaps be defined according to three terms: solipsism, inversion and hyperbole. (85) Solipsism has already been mentioned. Des Esseintes's retreat from society can be extended to become a retreat from existence, the 'brute'. Thus according to Michel Lemaire,

Le dandy va tenter d'éliminer en lui tout ce qui appartient à la nature, à l'animalité, à l'humanité courante, il va s'efforcer de nier l'existence. (86)

But the success of this retreat seems precarious. Both solitude and physiology always appear as menacing forces in Huysmans' works. The body becomes a sort of torture chamber; the demands of the senses are unavoidable; satisfaction is always incomplete, bringing frustration and suffering, never pleasure. Des Esseintes's rebelliousness results in total loss of control over the 'machine': one cannot retreat from the body and ignore it -- if one does, it takes over. Chapter thirteen ends with a brutal affirmation of the all-embracing reality of the stomach, for example. Retreat from physical reality must

fail, whether that reality is social or physiological; for Huysmans, man's existence is rooted in a violently naturalist version of nature. There is no ethereal plane to escape to: even in his Catholic works, his saints and mystics are recognised by the noisome stench of their rotting bodies.

J. Halpern actually presents des Esseintes's withdrawal as a kind of ritual death, although as he also calls the house at Fontenay-aux-Roses a 'womb', metaphorical rebirth might seem a better expression. (87) In fact, however, des Esseintes is the creator, not the creation, of this 'womb'. (88) Despite his 'puissante nostalgie de la foetalité' (as Dominique Hoguez puts it), he wishes to control his world, to achieve voluntarily what Proust's narrator gains by chance:

Chez Des Esseintes, en effet, c'est moins le monde extérieur qui provoque la sensation (...), que la sensation qui crée le monde extérieur. (89)

Literal death has nothing to do with this stratagem: nothing seems closer to nature than a rotting corpse. On the contrary, des Esseintes attempts to escape the body by subjugating it to spirit. Perhaps because of his eventual submission to 'la névrose', critics like Hennequin and Lemaitre present des Esseintes as a creature virtually devoid of will, (90) though his enterprise is really meant to represent a triumph of the will, of mind over matter. A simple example of this is his habit of wearing fur coats in a heat-wave and forcing himself to shiver with cold (p.259): unlike M. Polantin, des Esseintes refuses to submit to the pressures of the seasons. His ambition might perhaps be judged from the fact that the epigraph to the novel is taken from the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck.

Des Esseintes, then, strives to make the world a function

of his consciousness, imagination taking over from a degraded reality. This goal might be seen as positive and idealistic: as Lemaire remarks,

On peut discuter des goûts particuliers de des Esseintes, mais ce qui importe est la démarche du dandy qui fait de chaque instant un instant de choix, d'élévation sensuelle et esthétique. (91)

When des Esseintes extols the 'artificial', the successes of the railway engineer or horticulturist, this could be interpreted as a desire to assert the triumph of human will over nature, the autonomy of the creative artist over the life process. But though such Promethean fantasies also occur elsewhere in Huysmans' writings, (92) in A rebours the author rapidly dispels any belief that aesthetic activity provides a solution for a character who rejects the world. Des Esseintes's social independence is shown to be false; the body reasserts itself over the spirit; his autonomy is infiltrated and destroyed.

Lemaire defines ennui as failure of desire, as

l'état dans lequel sombre l'être dont les désirs sont entravés par la réalité, coupés à la racine par le monde. (93)

By deliberately trying to cut himself off from the world, creating a vacuum around himself, des Esseintes seems in a way to be rendering himself particularly vulnerable to the 'void'. (94) Only his will protects him (he is without human contact or social purpose), and in fact the frenetic excess of some of his attitudes and actions seems to reflect an implicit fear of emptiness: his decorative projects literally fill in his existence. Lemaire indeed defines 'la névrose' not as the attack of nature, as I have suggested, but of 'ennui doublé de crises nerveuses'. (95)

Consequently, one function of the hyperbole that characterises A rebours seems to be that of concealment: deliberate overstatement

produces comedy or shock, disguising the essential pointlessness of the gesture described. Whereas wearing a fur coat in cold weather serves the obvious purpose of protection against the cold, wearing a fur coat in a heat-wave seems a somewhat puerile way of asserting indifference to heat or cold. We suspect that the meaning of this gesture does not lie in the triumph of mind over matter, but in the accomplishment of the gesture of defiance itself — des Esseintes's assertion of his withdrawal from normal patterns of behaviour. And the gesture of course depends, for its very abnormality, on a certain faith in what is held to be normal.

(One of des Esseintes's reasons for living by night is that it distinguishes him from other people, pp.20-21.) The potentially heroic aspect of des Esseintes's venture tends in practice to appear rather negative. His behaviour is comically scandalous, in no way to be admired; his revolt is conditioned by what he revolts against; one feels, so to speak, that he is a faker, not a fakir.

To turn to the third term which it was suggested might define des Esseintes's project, inversion, essentially he practises 'l'esthétique du détournement', a systematic, encyclopedic reversal of accepted values. (96) The sadistic exploits which he recollects in chapter six are reflected in the posture which des Esseintes strikes throughout the rest of the book. In deed, according to Huysmans, the force of sadism, as he defines it in chapter twelve of A rebours, lies not in sexual cruelty or the practice of evil, but in the jouissance produced by sacrilege, the defiling of the sacred, the moral idealistic rebellion of the à rebours (pp.241-44).(97)

Yet Huysmans himself points out the contradictions inherent in the attitude of the sadist-cum-satanist, comparing him to a

child wilfully defying its parents: he substitutes the devil for God, while continuing to hope God will damn him and simultaneously denying the existence of God (p.243). (Georges Elin and Simone de Beauvoir make much the same point about Sade, although they see him basically as a materialist atheist.) (98) Does des Esseintes's own rebellion reveal such wilful contradictions? One can certainly see that his project can, on the one hand, be presented as a creative search for new values or experience (des Esseintes as Prometheus), or on the other, as an exercise in perversity (des Esseintes as blasphemer). One might argue that, for the 'blasphemer', striking an attitude, creating a shock effect by the display of his perversity, is what counts. The fact that one can demonstrate that he is actually hidebound by the norms he rejects, that his posture contains patent contradictions, does not necessarily demolish his position: on the contrary, such a blatant absence of logic perhaps is a further affirmation of his perversity. A.E. Carter remarks that the decadents reject the 'natural' while accepting that the natural is 'natural'. 'From the very beginning, decadent sensibility is thus self-consciously perverse', apparently limited to a purely negative position. (99) Similarly, Mario Praz quotes two passages from Justine, one of which states that nature's dominion is inescapable, since the acts of the blasphemer are within and determined by nature, while the other expresses a frantic desire to outrage and overturn nature. (100) We seem to be left with a desire for freedom which recognises its own impossibility. If one accepts Simone de Beauvoir's version of Sade, however, A rebours, at least at first sight, seems to adopt a position which is the reverse of Sade's:

du credo généralement accepté 'La Nature est bonne, suivons-la', Sade en rejetant le premier point conserve paradoxalement

le second. L'exemple de la Nature garde une valeur impérative bien que sa loi soit une loi de haine et de destruction. (101)

Sade both challenges and imitates nature, matching evil with evil:

il ne s'agit pas de se soumettre à l'univers; mais de l'imiter dans un libre défi. (102)

But though des Esseintes certainly does not wish to 'imitate' nature, Huysmans himself ultimately appears unwilling or unable to reject entirely the imperative of nature, and naturalism.

Baudelaire's disdain for nature is well known. (103)

The famous boutade 'Je suis incapable de m'attendrir sur des végétaux' (104) is echoed rather vulgarly by Huysmans when he complains: 'Il y a un cochon de rossignol qui est dans cet arbre et qui gueule comme une vache'. (105) But Leakey points out the essential ambiguity of Baudelaire's attitude. He is torn between rejecting the impulses of nature and praising the vitality of 'natural' man, untainted by civilised decay, (106) as he indicates himself in the Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe. (107) One can set the poem 'J'aime le souvenir de ces époques nues...' against the 'Éloge du maquillage'. Huysmans himself was prepared to submit to nature's charms: a different letter to the abbé Mugnier describes the sense of soothing unity between subject, water, earth and sky evoked by reveries beside the lake at La Trappe-d'Igny. (108) In A rebours, nature, 'cette sempiternelle radoteuse' (p.35), according to des Esseintes, is to be 'replaced' by artifice (chapter two). But at the height of his nervous crisis, des Esseintes is driven to seek refuge in the garden (pp.251-52), or take walks in the country (p.130): nature, the world outside the house, on these occasions appears as a positive, restorative force.

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Perhaps one can try to explain such apparent contradictions, not by appealing to the illogic of perversity, but by arguing that A rebours attacks not nature itself, but a certain conception of nature (just as Kempf maintained that Baudelaire's misogyny sprang from a rejection of the bourgeois ideology of sex, not of sexuality itself). A basis for this view can indeed be found in Baudelaire's 'Éloge du maquillage'. Contrary to what A.E. Carter claims, he at least rejects the eighteenth-century notion of nature as an arbiter of morality or beauty. Nature in the raw is evil and destructive; civilisation and virtue are imposed upon it and in this sense 'artificial'. Where Sade follows nature which he too sees as evil, Baudelaire breaks with it. (109) According to Baudelaire, make-up, la toilette, is likewise an imposing of spirituality on nature in the aesthetic sphere, an attempt not to imitate nature but to reform it. The argument shifts from a seemingly tautological discussion of whether man can 'escape' nature, an absolute force, to a discussion of the different ways man's relationship to nature can be posited and interpreted; this imposition of meaning on nature is in fact a way of defining 'culture'. In other words, A rebours could be called not Against Nature, but Against Culture. Thus if Huysmans attacks nightingales, it is because he rejects facile notions of the picturesque; there is nothing inherently contradictory in this with, on another occasion, finding the natural world a genuine source of value.

This 'ideological' interpretation of A rebours is certainly supported by the fact that a large part of the book consists of an investigation of culture, and particularly art. Aesthetic experience (culture) is what makes the world (nature) digestible

for des Esseintes. He resembles the Goncourts who affirmed: 'Tout ce qui n'est pas traduit par l'art est pour nous comme de la viande crue'. (110) A contemporary reviewer of the novel remarked that

le névrosé de M. Huysmans, comme un Bouvard ou un Pécuchet d'une espèce nouvelle, passe, lui aussi, en revue, le répertoire des connaissances humaines. (111)

In the opinion of Brunner and Coninck,

tout l'intérêt de ce livre est dans ce coup d'oeil jeté par un artiste sur les idées, les arts et la littérature de notre civilisation. (112)

As Halpern says, A rebours is not a linear narrative but encyclopedic discourse. (113) Time and plot give way to a series of essays, while space as well, in the surroundings des Esseintes creates, becomes a kind of museum. Not only is A rebours a book about other books, but its décor consists in part of a series of cultural or literary 'quotations'. Thus as Grojnowski points out, the dining room designed like a ship's cabin, complete with a copy of The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym, refers to Poe (though reminiscent also of Gautier's Fortunio or Jules Verne); the attire of des Esseintes's woman servant is meant to evoke a Flemish Beguine convent. Huysmans, however, incorporates most of these references into the process of decorative inversion which functions through the book. Des Esseintes has no desire to set to sea; his ecclesiastical trappings have little religious significance.

Unfortunately, if one begins to look in more detail at specific examples dealing with artifice and nature in A rebours, one finds, not the positive ethical concern of Baudelaire, but an essentially negative, albeit humorous, posture and latent contradiction. (114) The man-made can rival nature in its aesthetic

appeal, claims des Esseintes; but when, by way of example, he compares the charms of women unfavourably to those of railway-engines, the passage strikes us more through its comic ingenuity than its philosophical seriousness. Though at first sight it may appear a piece of misogynic mischief, the comparison in fact subordinates the artificial to the natural: far from 'replacing' women (we should recall that this is supposedly the point of the argument, nature having had its day, in des Esseintes's opinion), the engines are actually personified as women, as an appealing blonde or brunette. In other words, nature remains the point of reference; its authority is unshaken.

Similarly, des Esseintes is amused to find, when he buys his exotic flowers, that nature has been 'reduced' to imitating man-made products or animals' membranes when fashioning these hideous blooms (p.141). If by imitating the artificial nature is 'reduced', however, then des Esseintes must accept the implicit superiority of the natural over the artificial in other circumstances; otherwise there would be no reason to see this as a defeat for nature. In chapter ten, des Esseintes prides himself on his inventive mastery of the 'grammar' of perfumery. Again, however, imitation of a natural odour seems to be the mark of success. Nature may play no active part when, thanks to perfumes and artificial flowers, he creates the illusion of spring in November in Pantin; but the illusion still apes nature.

The climax, 'l'exaucement suprême' (p.318), of the cult of artifice is reached in chapter fifteen, according to des Esseintes, when he begins nourishing himself exclusively with enemas (i.e. injections of liquid into the large intestine through the anus). This macabre fantasy is developed at length, with a list of

different 'recipes' so that the patient's 'palate' does not become jaded, and so on. It is hard to explain this scene as simply 'ideological': Huysmans seems, as Michel Tournier would say, to have achieved the goal of raising scatology to the level of metaphysics. For des Esseintes, this is the height of his biological rebellion:

quelle décisive insulte jetée à la face de cette vieille nature dont les uniformes exigences seraient pour jamais éteintes! (p.318)

In fact, one can argue that this passage combines an attack on 'ideology' and 'biology', that is, culture and nature. As Edmund Leach remarks, in his book on Lévi-Strauss:

food is an especially appropriate 'mediator' because, when we eat, we establish in a literal sense, a direct identity between ourselves (Culture) and our food (Nature). (115)

In this case, the body represents nature, and food, des Esseintes's peptone injection, culture: he reverses both customary ways of preparing food (his 'dining' habits are presented in mocking length to emphasise this point), which are culturally determined, and the processes of the digestive system, a biological fact. The figure of this inversion (the anus replacing the mouth) is particularly blatant, an appropriate conclusion both for A rebours and the naturalist obsession with scatology.

This episode is indeed the conclusion of des Esseintes's enterprise. Whereas Michel Tournier's Robinson passes through a 'fascial' stage in the course of a total transformation of his being, Huysmans' hero returns or relapses to a normal state. His last gesture heralds his defeat. If we sum up the account of des Esseintes's project, it does appear in a negative light. At first sight, he appears to reject nature in favour of a culture

which he strives to create for himself in isolation from human society. However, this plan is impossible, since culture derives from nature, which ultimately is equivalent to an inescapable biological reality. It is uncertain whether des Esseintes realises this; Huysmans certainly does, however, because not only does he show des Esseintes defeated by the impulses of his body, driven back to the world, both literally (the account of the neurosis), and metaphorically (the vision of syphilis at the centre of the novel), but also he reveals nature to be the hidden arbiter of des Esseintes's cult of artifice. Culture too proves to be inescapable: des Esseintes's isolation is actually supported (and in a sense caused) by society.

Since then, by definition, it is impossible to live 'against nature', des Esseintes's autonomy is severely limited. The 'metaphysical' aspects of A rebours do not go very far, because the author still accepts the deterministic view of nature of naturalism. One may try to save des Esseintes from total contradiction by arguing that he does not reject the absolute force, nature (absolute in terms of naturalism, that is), but rather reverses conventional ways of imposing culture on nature or of interpreting culture (preferring enemas to food, night to day, the artificial to the real, the morbid and obscure to the popular, cruelty to kindness etc.). Nevertheless he is shown to be trapped; in later works, Huysmans finds a possible means of release by inventing the 'supernatural' -- a higher order of meaning which subsumes both nature and culture -- but in A rebours, because des Esseintes is trapped, all his variations on the theme of inversion degenerate into empty gestures of defiance, verging on tautology.

Yet the fact that des Esseintes's failure to break out of the world, or Huysmans' to break out of naturalism, forms the subject matter of A rebours obviously does not condemn the book itself. The message of the book should ultimately be derived, not simply from the biography of des Esseintes (which has in a sense been the main subject of this chapter so far), nor from that of Huysmans (in the manner of commentators like Hloy or Barbey d'Aurevilly), but from the existence, the substance, of A rebours itself -- 'that prodigious book, that beautiful mosaic (...) a dose of opium, a glass of something exquisite and spirituous', as George Moore wrote, in flowery but appealing fashion. (116) Even des Esseintes can be redeemed, if seen aesthetically, in terms of imaginative zest, macabre humour, and brilliant stage-management. The form of his enterprise overshadows its content in value.

One might say the same for A rebours as a whole, that Huysmans' creative vigour is itself a source of meaning, filling in the hollowness which a critic like Meyers describes in the novel:

there remains in Huysmans, as in Moreau, scarcely concealed by their imaginative innovations and technical brilliance, both an excess and an emptiness, a fatal and fundamental superficiality. (117)

A simple example of how meaning is created through form is found in the presentation of des Esseintes's creations in perfume (chapter ten). Huysmans develops an elaborate linguistic analogy over several pages in order to describe the development of perfumes through the ages; but remove this grammatical, literary parallel, and this erudite tour de force becomes a dry enumeration of names. In other words, the whole effect of the passage lies in the complex metaphorical structure Huysmans builds around the perfumes. Yet Huysmans himself does not seem

to accept such a 'formalist' position. Like des Esseintes, he seems to be a seeker after essences: correspondences, analogies are not arbitrary, and therefore proof of the autonomy and ingenuity of the artist, but somehow have an absolute force, it seems. Thus to one M. Batilliat he writes:

Je crois que les transpositions d'un art dans un autre sont possibles. Je crois même que les parfums correspondent à certaines idées, peuvent évoquer des tableaux ou rappeler certains sons. (118)

Ironically enough, in the same letter he maintains that science and history have no real base, but are relative and variable (a similar argument to that in chapter two of La-bas). The 'correspondences' of A rebours, however, tend to be presented as though they had the value of objective truth: the liqueurs of des Esseintes's 'mouth-organ' correspond exactly to specific musical instruments (pp.70-72); the harmony between certain colours and certain temperaments can be stated with 'une exactitude presque mathématique' (p.22). Admittedly, these theories are presented as belonging to des Esseintes; one might argue that to make his stylistic gavage fully effective, Huysmans himself has to pretend that the illusory or invented has the validity of the 'real'.

One might even say that the whole point of A rebours is precisely to demonstrate the primacy of the imagination over 'la vulgaire réalité des faits' (p.33). A nightmare or reverie on correspondences is presented with the same forcefulness as the décor of the real world. Yet paradoxically, this 'Bible' of aestheticism reveals a nostalgia for the whole, the essential, for a source of value that is given as an absolute, not invented by the artist. When, in the preface of 1903, Huysmans dismisses his account of jewels in A rebours compared with that he gave in

La Cathédrale fourteen years later (pp.xv-xvi), it is because, in the meantime, he has discovered Christian symbolism, whose language is given by God. Thus the merely stylistic inventions of the first book are superseded in the second by the literal statement of truth, he says. Few of Huysmans' readers may accept his opinion that the linguistic brilliance of A rebours is inferior to the wearisome enumerations of La Cathédrale. God-given or otherwise. But the desire to go beyond aestheticism revealed in retrospect in the preface is also found in A rebours itself.

In chapter ten, the cult of artifice and illusion is seen as a reflection of or reaction to the general 'adulteration' of life, in both moral and material spheres: both our wine and liberty are equally 'frelatées et dérisoires' according to des Esseintes (p.185). At some time, we might infer from this, unsophisticated and 'real' values did exist; and indeed, in the final chapter, des Esseintes abandons his own private posture of sophistication (which seems in the long term to offer little more than the advantage of cynical lucidity compared with the unconscious adulteration practised by society at large), looking despairingly for nourishment to the old faith of Christianity and a past society which upheld this faith. In chapter fifteen neither the essence of food nor that of modern literature can nourish him. A reference to 'sa faim religieuse' (p.330) in chapter sixteen is followed by a curious passage on the adulteration and fabrication of consecrated wafers in modern times. The host is, apparently, no longer made from wheat but from potato starch:

Or, Dieu se refusait à descendre dans la féculé. C'était un fait indéniable, sûr; dans le second tome de sa théologie morale, S.E. le cardinal Gousset, avait, lui aussi, longuement traité cette question de la fraude au point de vue divin... (p.332)

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There then follows a vision of bread-making in the Middle Ages, by way of contrast: in those days, the Queen of France herself, Radegonde, or fasting priests and deacons, prepared the holy wafers, singing psalms all the while. Obviously, this nostalgia for the uncontaminated faith of a past age is cast here in an absurd light; nevertheless, the nostalgia is there, and becomes one of the central themes of La-bas.

The conclusion of A rebours shows clearly how des Esseintes, aesthete extraordinary, is also 'anxieux d'une Essence supérieure', of a Christian variety: the book is framed by the final prayer and the opening quotation from a Flemish mystic. (119) But we can establish another paradox in the way Huysmans devalues or ridicules des Esseintes's genuine anguish by insisting on the more absurd aspects of his preoccupations. One suspects that precisely because A rebours deals with some of Huysmans' most personal affections and anxieties (be they Mallarmé and Moreau, or impotence and sickness), the author uses des Esseintes as a mask which both reveals and simultaneously distorts and so conceals. (120) The passage on wafers just quoted displays the tone of mystifying exaggeration that makes so many commentators puzzle about the author's 'sincerity'. (121) The first sentence already suggests a relish in quoting the more absurd points of theology. Perhaps it is an unfortunate coincidence that the eminent cardinal cited has a name which means 'armpit' ('Le Gousset' is also the title of one of Huysmans' prose poems which celebrates this portion of the female anatomy); in any case, the categorical formality of the passage, the reference which follows to 'l'incontestable autorité de ce maître' (p.332), create a burlesque discontinuity between tone and content (in such areas, surely nothing is sure

and there can be no masters), a mischievous irony distinctly reminiscent of Bouvard et Pécuchet. (122)

J. Halpern in fact discovers a whole series of paradoxes running through the novel. For example, the novel obeys the naturalist model of heredity and degeneration, but caricatures the posture of decadence (argues Halpern); a ferocious vigour of expression is used to deny life -- des Esseintes is the opposite of passive in the energy of his negation; des Esseintes controls his world, but not his body; Huysmans' own text contains all the longueurs that des Esseintes rejects in his praise of prose poems. Halpern concludes that A rebours is 'written against itself':

To commit sacrilege, one has first to accept the sacred; to debunk nature, one has first to glorify it; to correct the novels of Zola, Huysmans swallows them. (123)

To these points one can add that the novel as it were both expands and contracts: Huysmans takes des Esseintes on a journey through culture which breaks the limits of naturalism, only to bring him back to a starting point already encompassed by his earlier fiction. The author handles his 'documents' brilliantly, gradually suggesting that des Esseintes at the age of thirty has mastered the total range of human experience, intellectual, sensual, or aesthetic. That Huysmans' display of erudition is something of a confidence trick (as Gourmont or Fumaroli show)(124) is beside the point: A rebours does not pretend to be a work of scholarship. Yet this mastery produces exhaustion, a draining of value, a frantic search to cover the void des Esseintes has exposed. Whereas Baudelaire's correspondances convey 'l'expansion des choses infinies', Huysmans' world, whatever its display of analogy, is one of fragmentation and claustrophobia: des Esseintes wishes to cut himself off from the world; he is trapped within

the broken-down machine of his body.

Dominique Hoguez, comparing A rebours with Gide's Les Nourritures terrestres (1897), demonstrates that the openness of the Gidian world is the exact opposite of the confinement experienced by des Esseintes. While des Esseintes removes himself from life, feeding off his own substance (as Huysmans puts it), Nathanaël exposes himself to the world: in Gide, 'Humer un parfum, ce n'est pas évoquer un monde mort, comme fait Des Esseintes, mais déguster la vie même'. (125) In a similar way, L.R. Furst sets A rebours against Novalis's Heinrich von Ofterdingen (1802), seeing the two works as archetypal examples of decadence and romanticism respectively:

Heinrich's journey is really a missionary conquest of the world, rising in an expanded spiral to the point of arrival, of fulfillment, whereas Des Esseintes's solipsistic withdrawal into ever narrower confines eventually drives him into a cul-de-sac from which he is forced into yet another retreat. His archetypal pattern is of a non-arrival; each of his projects results in a crisis, in effect a failure that further intensifies his pessimism to a nadir of Schopenhauerian nihilism. (126)

Decadence depends on fragmentation and disunity, not merely between subject and world, individual and society, but in terms of literature, between form and content, parts and whole, language and meaning. Huysmans himself, following Gautier, (127) compares the language of the Latin decadence to a rotting corpse, whose parts are flaking away and breaking up (p.55). Petronius's idiom is a pot-pourri of dialects and styles (pp.46-47), telling a story without plot or moral; Apuleius's style 'roulait des limons, des eaux variées, accourues de toutes les provinces' (p.48). 'Decomposition' is both social, physiological, and literary, as Bourget's well-known definition maintains:

Un style de décadence est celui où l'unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la page, où la page se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser la place à l'indépendance du mot. (128)

While classical prose aimed for clarity and unity, that of the Goncourts, for example, 'se brise en mille petits effets de détail, en mille singularités de syntaxe et de vocabulaire', Bourget adds. (129)

It is hardly surprising, then, that critics have found this process of decomposition outlined by Huysmans or Bourget in A rebours itself. Any attempt to describe the sequence of events in the novel tends to produce the impression that the book is something of a ragbag. Between the account of des Esseintes's installation at Fontenay-aux-Roses in the prologue and the first two chapters, and of the nervous disorders whose increasing seriousness forces him to leave his retreat, we are presented with a series of interludes, which have little connection either with each other, or with des Esseintes's movement in his present. Only in chapter eleven, when he sets out on his abortive trip to London, are we given a sequence of coherent action in the character's present -- which takes place outside the house. Within the house, however, it would be misleading to say that nothing happens or that des Esseintes remains immobile. If Captain Nemo conquers space in his submarine, des Esseintes's retreat (which has been compared to Nemo's) (130) becomes a module which dispenses with narrative time. The story unfolds as a series of anecdotes and reveries (the dentist, Auguste Langlois, Miss Urania etc.), descriptive setpieces (flowers, jewels, furnishings), and essays (on art and literature, birth-control or prostitution) which the reader experiences thanks to the more or less apparent

presence of des Esseintes. The 'interludes' are actually more important than the transitional points which link them (which, if present at all, tend to fall into a 'thématique vide'). Thus by far the longest of the sixteen chapters are the two dealing with Catholic and contemporary literature (twelve and fourteen). Time in the outside world is of little significance: from chapter seven, des Esseintes is said to be 're-living' his past life. The veritable deluge which drowns the trip to Paris in chapter eleven is followed, two days later in chapter thirteen, by a scorching heatwave. As Huysmans rather blithely remarks, 'La saison allait en se détraquant; toutes se confondaient, cette année-là...' (p.247). His insistence on this absence of transition might almost suggest an intentional pleasure in rupturing the requirements of external verisimilitude.

There is certainly a difference between this deliberate discontinuity (in terms of plot), where the supposedly parenthetical -- memory, discourse, or description -- in fact becomes the substance of the book, and the more or less successful attempts at welding action, psychology and description together which Huysmans makes in his previous novels. If A van-l'eau is the most striking of these earlier works, it is because its stylised brevity forbids the diffuseness and shapelessness which threaten the longer novels. But in A rebours, Huysmans gives up the pretence of writing an 'étude de mœurs' which follows a conventional chronology and which observes the movements of characters in the outside world. One writer calls A rebours 'merely a series of pastiches'. (131) According to Ruth Weinreb, (132) many episodes of A rebours could stand as individual prose poems; eleven of the sixteen chapters are removed from the fictional framework.

D. Mickelsen argues that since

Des Esseintes has withdrawn from society, from the realm of experience which forces choice and action — and which makes for 'story' (...), A Rebours could be infinitely expanded; its structures can accommodate an unlimited number of chapters, since time considerations are not crucial. (133)

Mickelsen also suggests that the book is best seen, not in linear or temporal terms, but as 'orange-shaped' (134): in other words, there is no core, but rather a cluster of episodes which together do form some sort of whole.

Though it appears unlikely that the book (or an orange) could really be 'infinitely expanded', certain scenes do seem fairly arbitrary. Huysmans' lengthy discursions on Latin or Catholic literary ^{texts} for example, tend to pall. (135) The layman is bewildered by the vast array of names cited within a few pages (Fumaroli suggests Huysmans either mischievously or erroneously made some of them up) (136); while Latinists like Jules Lemaitre were infuriated (as the author no doubt intended) by the caustic dismissal of Cicero, Virgil and company, (137) or tried, like Remy de Gourmont, to point out the gaps in Huysmans' knowledge of the subject. (138) Since the novel really recounts a series of experiments or experiences, rather than say following the protagonist through his day-to-day life (in the manner of Les Soeurs Viatard or even La-bas), this loose, episodic structure seems quite appropriate. If this creates an impression of discontinuity, one could argue that this in turn reflects des Esseintes's position of rupture, or perhaps even Huysmans' own ambivalence, as he strives to extend the possibilities of naturalism without actually rejecting it. Alternatively, one might argue that even if there is little cohesion between individual episodes, each episode functions successfully on its

own terms, thanks to the author's stylistic virtuosity, and at the same time helps to establish the general pattern of investigation, revolt and mystification which is repeated from scene to scene.

Nevertheless, just as Huysmans seems reluctant to substitute aestheticism for the vision of a world which exists according to untainted, absolute ideals, so too he seems not altogether prepared to accept the idea of a novel whose parts deliberately remain separate. He agrees with the dissatisfaction expressed by Zola, in a letter of 20 May 1884. Zola writes:

Peut-être est-ce mon tempérament de constructeur qui regimbe, mais il me déplaît que des Esseintes soit aussi fou au commencement qu'à la fin, qu'il n'y ait pas une progression quelconque, que les morceaux soient toujours amenés par une transition pénible d'auteur, que vous nous montriez enfin un peu la lanterne magique, au hasard des verres. (139)

Huysmans replies, apropos of des Esseintes's 'madness':

J'ai pas à pas, suivi les livres de Bouchut et d'Axenfeld sur la névrose; - je n'ai pas osé intervertir les phases de la maladie, déplacer les accidents; ainsi j'ai dû mettre à la fin, les altérations d'ouïe, alors qu'elles eussent mieux fait, entre d'autres chapitres qu'elles eussent assourdis et éloignés. Je me suis interdit avec ce système toute progression d'effets. (140)

All the same, despite Huysmans' dissatisfaction with his medical documentation, the account of des Esseintes's illness is perhaps the only continuous element in the plot. Not only are we given a chronicle of his symptoms, carried out over several chapters, but also, contrary to what Zola remarks, his condition begins to deteriorate noticeably after he begins to 'live off himself' in chapter seven and the nightmare in chapter eight. If, on the other hand, Zola's comment on des Esseintes's 'madness' means simply that at the end of the book he is no farther forward than at the beginning, then this surely is not a defect, but rather

the point of Huysmans' demonstration, of sending the character through a similar cycle of frustration to that found in En ménage or A vau-l'eau. Far from allowing des Esseintes to escape into insanity, Huysmans makes him bend to the naturalist reality principle of biological necessity, which has the force of a constant throughout the book. Presented in the prologue in terms of the naturalist theory of heredity, and symbolically in the nightmare, this biological principle gradually breaks down the character's struggle for independence.

Ultimately, however, A rebours is most memorable for the brilliance of the individual slides which the author passes through his 'magic lantern'. Halpern remarks that the novel contains all the fictional trappings which des Esseintes rejects in his praise of the prose poem. (141) Yet in fact, on closer examination, one sees that A rebours begins to reject the contingencies of character, plot, time and space, or at least subordinates them to a series of reveries (whose source is neither exactly des Esseintes nor Huysmans), to the play of language, of verbal virtuosity. It has been argued that des Esseintes is certainly not the alter ego of the author or any other person such as Montesquieu, but a character in his own right, grotesquely larger than life, derisively overshadowing the unfortunate Montesquieu with whom he is associated. However, the essential features of his character are better defined if he is seen, not as a 'person', in psychological terms, but socially or aesthetically (the aristocratic dandy), or physiologically (the victim of 'la névrose'), or as the bearer of a set of attitudes (revolt verging on the monstrous), or as a vehicle for the author's encyclopedic excursions. In other words, as Grojnowski suggests, des Esseintes can be made to dissolve as a 'self', just

as the boundaries between past and present, action and reverie, fall away in the novel.

Though Huysmans usually takes care to attribute all the opinions overtly expressed in A rebours to the hero (expressions such as 'à son avis' (p.33), 'comme il le disait' (p.35), 'Aussi... pensait-il que' (p.311), 'se disait-il' (p.318), 'se parlant à mi-voix' (p.318), appear throughout the book), one begins to feel that such devices are simply narrative gestures towards the presence of the hero, who is otherwise liable to be forgotten owing to the sheer quantity of 'thoughts' which pass through him. Often, in fact, des Esseintes is literally immobilised, when the narrative voice takes him over. Thus he may be 'Enfoui dans son fauteuil' (p.325, cf. p.169), as often as not before the fire:

Des Esseintes rêvassait; le brasier chargé de bûches emplissait d'effluves brûlants la pièce; il entr'ouvrit la fenêtre. (pp.69-70)

Chapter six, for instance, begins with the hero dreaming before the fire, takes off into his memories of his friend d'Aigurande's circular apartment ('sans motifs du reste', p.103), returns to let him stoke the fire, moves to another memory, and returns once more to the fireside. These reminders, whose only purpose is to suggest a transition between a virtually non-existent present and timeless reverie, are as it were fictional anchors, forming what Hamon calls a 'thématique vide'. R.P. Weinreb has studied some of the syntactic devices which Huysmans uses to push des Esseintes into the background (such as changes of tense and tempo), but seems to assume that because des Esseintes disappears as a physical presence, the opinions expressed must actually belong to Huysmans himself. Thus, regarding the discussion of prose poems and Mallarmé in chapter fourteen, she says: 'hero

and author join to establish an art poétique'. (142)

In fact, however, this 'art poétique' proves on investigation to be a utopian venture; even for des Esseintes, it remains a hypothetical ideal. The hero's musings on the language of Mallarmé produce a series of paradoxes: it is hermetic and mysterious ('adhésive, solitaire et secrète', p.297), apparently refusing to reveal its meaning; yet this very ellipsis, when penetrated by the reader, produces through its density an intensity of meaning unattainable in a more diffuse type of writing. Obscurity conceals and reveals richness; the refusal of direct communication (Mallarmé's symbols abolish 'l'énoncé de la comparaison', p.298) finally allows a communication that surpasses the verbal or literary, shaking the reader's whole being, 'jusqu'au ravissement, jusqu'à la douleur' (p.301). Thus what seems at first an excess of 'literariness' (the outside world, the terms of everyday language are excluded) results in a magical ecstasy verging on the mystical. Des Esseintes has discovered a similar incantatory power in Edmond de Goncourt's La Faustin (the example seems curiously chosen, a hundred years later), and finally makes the prose poem the bearer of the essence of literature. Des Esseintes revolts against the scaffolding of the novel, its 'longueurs analytiques et... superfétations descriptives' (p.301). Yet instead of simply scrapping the fictional framework, he dreams rather of 'condensing' it into a page or two, of a work that does not transmit meaning by referring to a world, but is a source of endless meaning in itself, thanks to the intensity produced by a kind of verbal implosion. Every word

ouvrirait de telles perspectives que le lecteur pourrait rêver, pendant des semaines entières, sur son sens, tout à la fois précis et multiple... (p.302)

Evidently, such a work, whose every epithet produces weeks of rapture, can only be imagined: as Huysmans himself suggests, the novel conceived in this way really disappears as literature and becomes spirit, 'une communion de pensée entre un magique écrivain et un idéal lecteur...' (p.302). (143)

Obviously, then, it is misleading to say that this is Huysmans' 'art poétique'. Even if we discount the fact that he dismisses Mallarmé as a 'joke' in his letter to Zola (that he chose to write at length about such little known poets as Mallarmé, Verlaine or Corbière doubtless is sufficient proof in itself of genuine interest), nevertheless we are left with the fact that the most apparent quality of all Huysmans' work is not hyper-subtle ellipsis but the opposite, a penchant for overstatement which often produces caricature in his characters and saturation in his descriptions. (144) Perhaps we can explain this paradox by replacing it with another: this passage on Mallarmé states explicitly the oscillation between naturalism and symbolism, or if one prefers, 'referentiality' and 'textuality', which runs through the whole novel, an oscillation which the author himself, however, finally seems to wish to refuse. (145) In other words, though one can describe A rebours as a 'hermetic' or magical work, Huysmans himself rejects this view of literature. (146) Thus des Esseintes is not allowed to escape 'reality'; his ark is soon riddled with fissures. The author of the novel finds his 'conversion' through literature, but this conversion takes him outside literature, to Catholicism; nevertheless, he continues to practise literature though less and less sure of its value, to parade, in the novels following La-bas, with less and less conviction the creaking fictional devices which des Esseintes

already scorns.

Huysmans also seems to underestimate the value of A rebours in his own critical comments on the novel. In the preface of 1903, far from seeing it as the centrepiece of his work, he presents it in biographical terms, as a confused initial statement of his spiritual development. An entry in his unpublished notebook known as 'Le Carnet vert' is even more negative:

Avec A Rebours et les décadents: j'ai été une Mère Gigogne n'accouchant que de fausses couches. (147)

This is perhaps because Huysmans has found the source of external value which des Esseintes yearns for: the attempt to create meaning oneself, to assert the autonomy of art, is consequently 'abortive', heretical. Yet the impact of A rebours is due to the density, the texture of its separate episodes. Huysmans' prose is almost literally a material, a tangible substance. (148) A reference at the end of the chapter on Latin literature to 'les fabriques de verbes aux sucs épurés, de substantifs sentant l'encens, d'adjectifs bizarres, taillés grossièrement dans l'or' (p.61) shows how Huysmans strives to create the illusion that words are not simply vehicles for meaning, but objects in their own right, with an 'essence', giving off incense, modelled in gold.

A rebours creates a fantasy world, through a type of magical enactment. The author's caprices are given form. According to Dominique Noguez: 'Des Esseintes, c'est Huysmans qui vient de gagner à la loterie'. (149) Noguez continues:

De là le rôle de la description dans A rebours: elle a un rôle constamment performatif ou, si l'on préfère, magique. (...) Comme les sorciers, Huysmans procède par mimétisme: son style est à l'image de ces objets qu'il désire et c'est comme s'il achetait chacun d'eux, dans la monnaie du langage, d'un mot rare ou d'une tournure raffinée. (...) Le mot est chez lui doublement signe (linguistique et monétaire). (150)

Huysmans' language is, literally, rich. But his coinage is purely literary: the world and objects he creates are obviously an illusion produced by the text. As Micheline Besnard-Coursodon suggests, a paradigm of the way A rebours functions can be found in the scene in chapter nine where des Esseintes makes a ventriloquist act out the dialogue between the Sphinx and the Chimera from La Tentation de saint Antoine: the woman's voice (that is, the text) holds together an impossible ideal (expressed in the famous sentence 'Je cherche des parfums nouveaux, des fleurs plus larges, des plaisirs inédits') and a sordid reality (the speaker is basically a talented prostitute). Huysmans cannot escape the sordid, the hallmark of naturalism; but the 'value' or point of the scene lies in the creation of the illusion, the mise en scène of the dialogue. What is expressed, moreover, is not really an ideal itself, but the desire for an ideal. As Besnard-Coursodon says:

Seul subsiste le désir du désir. La mise en scène de la jouissance se fait jouissance de la mise en scène. (151)

We return, it seems, to a highly formalist view of A rebours.

To quote Noguez again:

A rebours, c'est l'utopie extrême et troublante d'un monde entièrement fantasmatique substitué au monde réel: il n'y a plus de référent, il n'y a plus qu'un signifié immensément dilaté. Dans Les Nourritures terrestres au contraire, c'est le référent qui pour ainsi dire prend toute la place: les signes du langage s'épuisent... à le poursuivre... et c'est à peine (d'où cette forme aphoristique, elliptique, d'où ces halètements) s'ils parviennent à simplement l'évoquer. (152)

Thus while Gide's work beckons frantically towards the world,

A rebours closes in upon itself, refusing to refer to the outside.

Both Dominique Tachon, in an article appropriately entitled

'A rebours: la représentation blanche' and Grojnowski argue

much the same point. (153) According to the latter, the novel

contains 'Une subversion de la représentation' in favour of 'le

règne du signe' (154); while the 'realist illusion' sees writing as translucent, an optical instrument which reflects the world (one thinks of Zola's screens or Stendhal's mirrors), A rebours stops short at itself. Its object is not the world but the text itself.

Such polarisations, however, between 'traditional' and 'modern' works, textuality and referentiality, seem inadequate. It has already been argued, following the views of critics such as Lemaitre, Valéry or Hamon, that the supposedly 'photographic' naturalist text actually contains a highly reflexive component. One might ask then, following the quotation from Noguez above: has Huysmans in A rebours abandoned naturalist writing (copying the real world minutely) to create fantasy, or is it not rather that the extremely dense type of descriptive writing practised by naturalism, far from being simply referential and leading the reader through itself and back to the real world, actually establishes a form of autonomy through its very solidity (whereas, on the other hand, the style of Les Moeurs terrestres, as described by Noguez, is more dependent on the implied reference to the real world, because its very 'thinness' demands something outside itself to fill it in)? Georges Elin attributes Stendhal's parcimony with descriptive details to a desire to avoid saturation or myopia, which block the imaginative process (155) -- faults which, one might well feel, precisely tend to afflict naturalist writing. The struggle to render the world in a multitude of details becomes a struggle with language.

In any case, it seems likely that Huysmans himself would have rejected the 'modernist' label which some critics attach to him. (156) For Jules Lemaitre, he was a sort of 'précieux ridicule',

the elegance of his style contrasting grotesquely with the sordidness of his subject matter. B. Weiss, reflecting on 'la modernité du style huysmansien', remarks:

Le style est la préoccupation première de l'auteur, comme il en va d'habitude dans les périodes de décadence, où le souci de la forme l'emporte sur celui du contenu, où tout est ramené à des préoccupations d'écriture. (157)

But style is itself as much a substance as a form for Huysmans, something ornate and luxurious; he rejects Stendhal because his style seems dry, barren, without body. (158) Though we may agree with Meyers or Duployé, who suggest that Huysmans' decorative excess is a stratagem for concealing emptiness, Huysmans himself, by insisting on the primacy of language, in for example the utopian presentation of the prose poem, seems to be looking not towards 'formalism', but a kind of hyper-realism: words are not arbitrary signifiers, but receptacles containing an unending source of meaning, unshakeable and absolute, producing ecstasy. (159) That he rejects the arbitrary trappings of the novel in favour of the mystic epithet, however, suggests that Huysmans realises that naturalism, bound to the contingencies of the world, can never reach this state of grace, and also that literature can never offer him a 'solution', since he rejects naturalism while writing a novel that derives from naturalism, and continues to write similar novels. A rebours, then, represents both a triumph of literature and at the same time a rejection of literature, of the aesthetic, formalist venture.

The multiple paradoxes of A rebours can perhaps best be explained as a series of oscillating movements which start from some of the themes and conceptions of naturalism. Biological determinism and social conditioning struggle with an assertion

of individual independence from the world; a vision of universal fragmentation and decomposition, producing aesthetic revolt, struggles with a nostalgia for the whole, the natural; a magnificent, minutely detailed recording of the dimensions of an invented reality runs parallel to a rejection of the fictional, a desire to transcend the limits of the novel to a higher, more direct form of communication. Huysmans neither really rejects nor continues the naturalist novel, but sets out to discover the limits of the main conditioning forces of naturalism (determinism, decomposition, description) and what possible alternatives there may be to these forces (revolt, aestheticism, symbolism). But des Esseintes's revolt fails and Huysmans rejects the proposal that literature can be its own source of value as purely utopian. Like his hero, he is brought back to the worldly world, remaining, in this sense, a naturalist. The journey of discovery of A rebours leads him full circle.

One begins to see how difficult it is to separate Huysmans' literary and spiritual development. Since A rebours rejects both the natural (society and nature are rotten) and also shows the hollowness of the pose of decadent aestheticism (des Esseintes's independence is spurious, just as the dream of a literature which creates its own reality remains a dream), the author seems to leave himself little room for manoeuvre. Two recent commentators (Fumaroli and Waldner) have tried to revitalise the traditional 'Catholic' interpretation of Huysmans' aims in writing A rebours (a reductive interpretation which Huysmans makes himself in the preface of 1903) by presenting the writer's eventual conversion as a literary transformation.

Marc Fumaroli sees A rebours as a type of exorcism. Huysmans

projects himself into des Esseintes 'sarcastically' -- in other words, 'pour s'en arracher, et se libérer, en l'objectivant, d'une de ses tentations les plus profondes'. (160) Des Esseintes is a dilettante haunted by impotence and psychosis (we recall that Huysmans describes A rebours as 'de la démence et de la bave', and as 'mon cauchemar de raffinement arrivé jusqu'à la folie')(161) He is to Huysmans as Werther is to Goethe, or Swann to Proust. (162) The decadent work, of which A rebours is a prime example, escapes the state of vertigo and dispersion from which its heroes suffer by celebrating this state; the book communicates 'le vertige de la destruction' to others, and in so doing preserves its creator from it. (163)

Although this 'cathartic' interpretation does help explain the process of magnification and distortion one finds in the creation of des Esseintes, the efficacy of the exorcism seems doubtful. Huysmans complains to Zola that writing A rebours has actually exacerbated '(sa) personnelle névrose' (164); in his next novel, En rade, he invents another dilettante, Jacques Marles, who, reversing the project of des Esseintes, seeks his solution by retiring to the countryside, the bosom of nature, as it were. (Such naivety is of course punished.) But certainly the novels of Huysmans are, as Waldner says, a succession of explorations. While Zola stands outside his enquiries,

Huysmans, sensible et plus fragile, ne cesse de s'interroger sur la valeur de ce qu'il découvre et sur le sens d'une expérience du réel qui, d'esthétique à l'origine, s'approfondit rapidement en expérience morale. Son regard devient vision et la vision découverte éventuellement subversive de l'objet, cependant que l'observation des choses induit en une nostalgie de l'être, avant d'aboutir à un constat de carence et à une condamnation radicale. (165)

Through his naturalist investigations of a reality seen to have less and less value, Huysmans discovers a 'néant métaphysique'.(166)

This discovery is not incidental to the act of writing, but a direct result: 'A Rebours n'est pas tant le témoin que l'instrument de sa métamorphose', a paradigm

du retentissement essentiel qu'implique le recours à l'imaginaire et du pouvoir 'constituant' de l'écriture. (167)

It is well known that the event which most changed the course of Huysmans' existence in middle age, his return to the Catholic church, sprang from his research or search for a new form of literary expression after he had completed La-bas. But La-bas, in the opening chapter, already states explicitly the desire for a literary conversion, the wish to transmute naturalism into a wider, more satisfying form. Perhaps the impact, the colour and the adventurousness of A rebours, and to a lesser extent of En rade and La-bas, can be attributed to the fact that they are, as it were, written 'against naturalism'. While Huysmans, in these three central works, successfully maintains a tension between the dictates of a literary genre based on materialism and his own idealism, the three novels that precede them are essentially juvenile products of this genre, and the three novels that follow them lose their fictional autonomy under the weight of the Catholic dogma which they struggle to encompass.

* * * * *

CHAPTER FIVE

EN RADE AND LA-BAS:

BEYOND NATURALISM

Les incubes donnent un sperme froid.

(Éliphas Lévi)

For Huysmans, the years between A rebours and La-bas were those of the 'incubation' of his religious faith, a period he himself regarded as being shrouded in mystery (preface to A rebours, p.xxvii). From a biographical view, En rade (1887) and La-bas (1891) thus fall into a transitional phase in Huysmans' literary output and both represent attempts to find a substitute for the naturalist novel, which A rebours had made redundant. The final solution will be to turn the experience of conversion into a series of autobiographical novels; but in the meantime, having declared himself against naturalism in A rebours, Huysmans tries to discover in these two works what lies beyond naturalism. But just as A rebours, whatever its revolutionary nature, remains embedded in a physiological fatality which is highly naturalist, so too the innovatory explorations of En rade and La-bas eventually reveal a similar circularity: though the first novel contains sequences which seem purely fantastic, on another level it belongs to the genre of the 'peasant novel', (1) where heredity and environment continue to play a vital role. Realising perhaps that he will always remain a naturalist whatever his frustrated idealism, in the first chapter of La-bas, after delivering a caustic criticism of naturalism as practised by his contemporaries, Huysmans outlines a programme for a new naturalism, the 'naturalisme spiritualiste' which anticipates the ambitious striving for synthesis of the religious works which follow La-bas. The nature and validity of this new naturalism, as revealed in En rade and La-bas, form the subject matter of this chapter.

'Une indicible tristesse lui serrait à nouveau le coeur' (p.54): such phrases ring like a melancholy refrain throughout En rade, as the hero Jacques Marles with ever increasing anguish

sees his desire for a country retreat turn into a harrowing fiasco. On the run from his creditors in Paris, he and his wife Louise seek momentary refuge in the deserted château de Lourps (situated in the Brie, near Provins), which is looked after by his wife's aunt and uncle, the peasants Norine and Antoine. But the hoped-for haven, the 'rade', turns out to be a trap. Life in the countryside proves to be miserable and costly, thanks to the brutal, grasping peasants, the derelict château, the foul weather and the inaccessibility of provisions. At the same time, the woes of Jacques's personal existence are described in grating detail. His nights are tormented by strange dreams; his wife by a mysterious illness, whose symptoms they observe in a stray cat, the horrific death throes of which seem to predict all too clearly the fate which awaits Louise. Unable to resist this chaos, the two of them begin to feel an increasing aversion for one another; such is the fate of human relations when put to the test, Huysmans opines.

Thus as Léon Bloy remarked, (2) the title of the book seems somewhat ironical (though the expression 'laisser en rade' means, not a safe berth, but to be left high and dry, in the lurch). Yet strangely enough, only a fortnight after the book was published in April 1887, (3) Huysmans records a quite genuine yearning for a 'rade' in the country in the 'Carnet vert' having previously described Lourps itself as a 'havre' and a 'rade' in a letter of August 1885. (4) Only in 1901, driven back to Paris from Ligugé, did Huysmans apparently finally learn the lesson of En rade and give up such aspirations, as a gloomy note in the 'Carnet' indicates. (5) En rade is then, in a sense, a deeply personal novel, apart from its obvious autobiographical sources. (6) Certainly it is more than a sardonic account of peasant life

and manners, conveniently predating Zola's La Terre by a few months, and seemingly determined to dispel once and for all any remaining notions of bucolic bliss, with its gruesome presentations of a calving, a bull covering a cow, and sweat-soaked labourers in the fields. Unlike Zola, Huysmans reveals no compensating desire to hymn paeans to the fructuous earth.

At first sight, the novel appears to split into two halves, as the Swiss writer Édouard Rod suggests in a letter to the author:

Je préfère sans comparaison des livres comme A Rebours et En Rade à vos précédents. Il me semble que c'est seulement dans ceux-là que vous êtes entièrement vous-même, avec votre double nature de fantaisiste et d'observateur. (7)

Thus, on one side, one might argue, there is a farmyard version of naturalism, with uncle Antoine covered in liquid dung bursting into the Parisians' bedroom (chapter four), and a presentation of the main cycles of life (birth, death, mating) seen, appropriately enough those opponents of the 'bestial' aspects of naturalism might have thought, as they affect animals (in La Terre, Zola manages to have a cow and a peasant woman giving birth simultaneously in adjoining rooms). Meanwhile, inside Jacques's bedroom, unrolls a series of lurid dreams apparently inspired by Gustave Moreau or Odilon Redon (8) and unconnected with the diurnal rustic action. In the first sequence (chapter two), Jacques sees the bedroom wall of the sinister château dissolving, seemingly under supernatural or hallucinatory action; only retrospectively are these events integrated into the realistic narrative with the explanation that he was dreaming. The two other sequences are deliberately isolated into separate chapters (five and ten), as though jaundiced, conscious observation of country life ^{by day} were being set against -- but also divided from -- exploration of the bizarre realms of

the hero's unconscious imagination by night.

To Zola's perhaps predictable rejection of this opposition, Huysmans replied deferentially:

Quant à votre opinion sur les jambes différentes de ce pantalon, l'une réelle, l'autre en l'air, elle est hélas! la mienne. Vos réflexions sont absolument justes. (...) ces trois grands diables de chapitres... ont un peu l'air de venir à l'hazard (sic) de la fourchette. (9)

Robert Baldick suggests this polarity indicates Huysmans' dissatisfaction with naturalism, the desire for 'two paths' expressed explicitly in La-bas: or as Léon Bloy put it:

l'esthéticien surélevé, culminant, d'A Rebours, vaincu par l'incommutable destin d'impopularité de tout grand artiste, mais inapte à se transformer, a tout naturellement choisi l'estuaire illimité des songes pour y dégorger l'inavouable spiritualité de sa pensée! (10)

But the dislocation implied by such interpretations -- grating naturalism occasionally being exchanged for a spiritual or fantastic safety valve -- gives a misleading impression of the continuity and tone of En rade. Since the dreams only occupy three out of the twelve chapters, there is a certain disproportion, besides, in this simple contrast; though of course one might also include in the 'fantastic' Jacques's darkly humorous speculations about the uses of extracts from corpses as perfumes and spices in chapter nine (a passage which appears in Breton's Anthologie de l'humour noir).

Gallot dismisses the dreams as mere literary setpieces, pretexts for bravura writing. (11) Evidently there is some truth in this; the second dream, of the lunar excursion, for instance, is a developed version of the prose poem 'Cauchemar' in the Croquis parisiens. Yet En rade actually reads much more simply and harmoniously than many of Huysmans' other novels, where documentation or description tend to take over the narrative.

As Michael Issacharoff says, of En rade:

C'est une des rares oeuvres que le romancier n'alourdit pas d'une documentation excessive; il laisse pour une fois libre cours à son imagination. (12)

The opposition dreams-reality, or fantastic-naturalistic, against which commentators stumble is in fact only one of a number of oppositions which one can make in charting out the thematic structure of the novel. Night is contrasted to day, or darkness to light. Jacques is tortured not only by dreams, but by harvest bugs that set the skin on fire (p.176), or by the interminable agony of the cat (chapter twelve), so that he is driven from rest by both spiritual and physical anguish. Humorous episodes (admittedly of a macabre sort, as often as not) break up the pervading sense of melancholy; similarly, Huysmans sometimes interrupts his gleeful debunking of rural myths with genuinely lyrical descriptions of nature. Again, the oppression Jacques is gripped by may give way to a feeling of calm. The Parisians, impecunious and debilitated, presented with some sensitivity, are obviously set against the peasants, who possess a primitive strength but also a caricatural set of vices. Finally, nature, proliferating luxuriously but dangerously as it invades the château and church, reducing them to decay, or assailing the protagonists in the form of the harvest bugs, is tamed in the stasis of the lunar vision.

The fantastic or symbolic, moreover, takes over the whole domain of the château de Lourps. The story opens like a Gothic novel: the church outlined in black against the flaming red clouds of a sunset, the silhouettes of its rose windows like 'de gigantesques toiles d'araignées pendues au-dessus d'une fournaise' (p.9); the château, vast, uninhabitable, like a

prison (p.14). (13) Its walls do not simply dissolve into liquid at the beginning of the first dream, but are constantly liable to give way: a room which at first sight preserves intact the glories of the eighteenth century, turns out to be the most decrepit of all, as Jacques investigates the labyrinthine passages of the château ('Un coup de poing et tout croulait', p.69); in the library, 'En bas, en haut, tout s'avarait, se porphyrisait, s'écailait, se cariait...' (p.72). The surface of the waking world is, it seems, extremely fragile; the haven which Jacques has chosen is liable, quite literally, to collapse at any moment, offering no protection against the outer world -- against torrential rain, a tree which has burst into one room, or a marauding screech-owl.

The unequivocal emergence of the fantastic in En rade clearly anticipates the preoccupation with the occult in Là-bas and the marvellous aspects of Christian legend in the later works, but at this stage it would be more accurate to say, not that reality is impinged on by the fantastic in the brooding presence of the château de Lourps, but that the real world seems highly unstable: like the château, Jacques's ambitions, marriage, wife, illusions about the countryside, all crumble away from him. J.H. Matthews in Surrealism and the Novel maintains that Huysmans 'uses naturalism to discredit reality', (14) deliberately subverting the naturalist universe. A letter to Guiches certainly supports this argument:

En Rade vient d'être, pour moi, une grande passion. Je m'y suis abîmé avec enivrement, dans l'ordure des âmes et le néant des choses, mais c'est fini! Je n'en veux plus de cette prcherie de naturalisme! (15)

But Matthews seems to imply that Huysmans' intention is to set up an alternative to naturalism, 'to delineate a world which

stands outside realism':

In Jacques Marles, tortured by the world of reality and obliged in his search for release from its oppressive presence to retire into dreams, is prefigured the surrealist artist, for whom day-to-day reality is no more than the projection of a frustrating universe which, in separating man from his desires, fills him with inescapable anguish. (16)

Yet the dreams do not enable Marles to escape from 'le néant des choses': they are not a means of releasing him from anguish but rather a product of anguish. In fact, far from providing an alternative world, the second and third dreams in particular almost seem to be allegorical or symbolic commentaries on reality, which conclude that there is no alternative.

En rade superficially appears to be a naturalist novel enlivened with certain surrealist passages. Better justice is done to the unity of the book, however, if it is described in terms of a series of thematic oppositions, one element of which is the contrast dream-reality. The novel might also be presented in 'horizontal' or 'vertical' terms -- a division which in a way dispenses with the separation of obviously naturalist or fantastic aspects and which looks forward to the supernatural dimension, the 'là-bas', of the following works. On the one hand, we have a series of spectacles and setpieces, be they imaginary or realistic -- the château, landscapes, peasant manners, the palace of Assuérus or a trip to the moon; on the other, a constant desire to plunge into 'l'ordure des âmes', as Huysmans put it, to probe the skin of reality or of characters, revealing the involuntary baseness of human behaviour, the rottenness of nature, deliberately seeking the bizarre or mysterious, even if this search eventually only reinforces the pessimistic message of the book. A model for

this 'vertical' perspective is provided in chapter three, by Jacques's speculations about dreams. His reflections range from the supernatural to the scientific, without proposing any specific answers (like Bouvard and Pécuchet, Huysmans likes demonstrating that 'les savants annoncent', p.62): what is revealed is simply the urge to speculate about mysteries, to go beyond the surface. Certain recurrent images reaffirm the existence of this perspective, which suggests a vertiginous uncertainty. Thus the castle both oppressively encloses the hero (p.14), while itself collapsing in the face of nature; yet when he tries to convert this claustrophobic feeling into a sense of snug security by finding a room which is watertight and inhabitable, the château then becomes a maze of doors opening infinitely one on to another (pp.17-18, pp.70-71); in the darkness of the bedroom, Jacques has the chilly impression of being surrounded by water (p.28); but when he tries to explore this fluid environment, he finds the castle cellars solidly blocked and impenetrable (chapter nine). Pierre Citti points out the figures of vertigo which appear in the dreams: the firmament is inverted (p.215, cf. p.97), the tower of Saint-Sulpice is an inverted well. (17) Both images seem to recall the well in the château, which Jacques is unable to master; his incapacity in the real world becomes a cosmic uncertainty.

Such echoes seem to suggest that if one examined some of the surface themes and oppositions in En rade, one might discover enough parallels or reminiscences to establish a metaphorical, 'vertical' unity between them. How far can the most obviously naturalist aspects of the book (emerging from the 'pigsty of naturalism') be related to the depths of the soul into which Huysmans simultaneously delves?

This alternation between depths and surfaces, spiritual and physical, the face of reality whose corruption naturalism records and the underside where perhaps some meaning or solution may lie, is reflected in the contrast between the Parisians, Jacques and Louise, and their peasant hosts. While the first are sapped from within by sickness or anguish, the peasants seem only to exist on the surface of their being, cut off from the inside. The harvest bugs make the Parisians rend their thin skins in agony, whereas 'le cuir grenu' (p.176) of the peasants feels nothing, impenetrable to such assaults from the outer world. The peasants are, of course, presented as physical caricatures (with a vengeful virtuosity), (18) functioning according to crude appetites, for food, sex or money -- the opposite of Jacques and Louise, whose physical appearance remains unclear, since their mental torments are what occupy the author. The peasants may be indifferent or impervious to the hostile manifestations of the outside world (Antoine, admittedly, falls ill, but unlike Louise soon recovers), yet at the same time they control their environment far more effectively than the city-dwellers: while Jacques is unable to obtain provisions without being swindled, or even to draw water from the well, Norine and Antoine, with their agricultural economy, are self-sufficient, perhaps even rich, easily able to exploit their sophisticated counterparts. (19)

This vigour may itself be slightly mysterious. The postman, a figure meant to provide comic relief, exists as a Gargantuan appetite, endlessly draining litres of wine or greedily devouring 'l'urinaire avarie d'(un) fromage bleu' (p.86). One is led to wonder what strange furnace exists beyond his voracious jaws,

behind

son oeil qui semblait le soupirail par lequel
passaient les flammes couvant sous sa peau cuite. (p.133)

The peasants' forcefulness is repellent, even inhuman. Antoine is strong (p.18), but desiccated (p.20), drained as it were of all inner, unnecessary substance. Similarly, Norine appears as a 'poupée de bois' (p.13): 'rien en elle ne rappelait la femme' (p.21). And yet there is a strange insistence on her blue eyes, 'incisifs, jeunes, presque obscènes' (p.21), which significantly enough remain in Jacques's mind as he reflects on his first erotic dream (p.43), an indication no doubt of a female sexuality more threatening than that of his own wife. (The eyes of 'La Vérité' in the third dream are the same colour; like the blue eyes of the Pox in A rebours and Mme Chantelouve's green eyes in La-bas, they are described with equal insistency.)

Sexuality in fact is insisted on in both the presentation of the rural setpieces (the calving, covering, and scene in the inn at Jutigny) and the four main characters' private lives; at the same time, the first and third dreams are patently eroticised. While Jacques, at the age of thirty, has been obliged to cease sexual relations with his wife (p.128), the aged Antoine and Norine continue to desport themselves every night ('Puis que c'est ben bon, hein, mon homme?' p.202), it seems. And Jacques is filled with 'un immense dégoût pour ces ridicules secousses' (p.202). The oeuvre de chair, or simply the flesh in all its forms, is constantly shown without joy, but with a lingering, repelled fascination. Just as Jacques and Louise are forcibly preoccupied by her sickness, which in fact becomes the only remaining product of their marriage (it is hinted that the

disease may even be due to a rupture caused by initial intercourse, p.116), since it destroys all their other ties, so too Huysmans seeks out corresponding signs of disease and degeneration in nature. Thus the comments on Antoine's virility are quite naturally followed by a description of the hideous appearance of the half-crippled cat. In fact the farmyard setting of En rade allows the author to use animals to present his horror of the flesh and fecundity with an explicitness that might perhaps have been considered obscene if applied to humans. (Despite the book's superficial similarity to La Terre, its intention is really quite different.) (20)

The object of the calving scene in chapter four, for instance, seems to be to show what is after all a natural act (given, however, a literary novelty value and potency by being a taboo subject) as being sickening to an inexperienced sensitive observer. (21) The stench of the cowshed is itself nearly sufficient to make Jacques and Louise pass out; the calf appears like a lump of meat ('comme ces pieds de mouton mal cuits, servis dans des restaurants', p.79); the emphasis is on blood and mucus ('la vulve saignait des stalactites de morves roses', p.80). The calf is actually no more than a lump of meat, a piece of livestock, to the peasants: the birth is not an example of the mysteries of nature, but a commercial transaction (their 'affection' for the cow disappears once its offspring is safely produced) -- 'il faut que le veau soit anémié, complètement déprimé, pour qu'il se vende' (p.85). One feels Pierre Cogny has rather missed the point, when he writes of such an episode:

Les détails inutiles de ce genre abondent et ne méritent pas que l'on s'y arrête davantage. (22)

Surely, on the contrary, Huysmans' complaisant lingering over such horrors is highly significant for his future development: La-bas recounts ad nauseam the desecration of the flesh, as the naturalist vision turns into a tortured frenzy, with the castle of Gilles de Rais becoming a human slaughter-house. And just as Gilles seeks, not simply perverted sadistic pleasure, but a key to the mysteries of the universe within the dismembered bodies of his victims, so Durtal discovers a key to a source of spiritual meaning in the tortured body of Grünewald's Christ.

But in En rade, this painful displaying of the flesh seems to evoke rejection, while constantly, however, forcing itself on Jacques and the narrator -- as though Huysmans suspected that this might be a source of mystery while resolutely refusing to admit the fact. Thus Jacques is forced to witness, as a horrified voyeur, the enaction, in their most bestial form, of the three fundamental facts of life -- birth, death, copulation. The 'lyricism' of the mating of a bull and cow

se composait d'un amas de deux sortes de viandes qu'on battait, qu'on empilait l'une sur l'autre puis qu'on emportait, aussitôt qu'elles s'étaient touchées, en retapant dessus! (p.243)

The last chapter contains a harrowing description of the cat's death throes, unrelieved by the sardonic humour with which the author debunks the rural scenes. Jacques is unable or unwilling to finish off the wretched creature. This impotence is grimly contrasted with Antoine's and Norine's avaricious efficiency, as, the Parisians having departed, they make haste to dispose of the animal in order to steal the old petticoat it is lying on.

Far from being an escape into the exotic, the dreams reaffirm in symbolic or fantastic form this naturalist vision of a world

bound to the torments of the flesh. In the first, Jacques sees the virgin Esther presented to King Assuérus. The pomegranates impaled on the columns of the palace (p.31), or the King's phallic sceptre, make the outcome of this ritual quite clear:

L'oeil du Roi vrilla cette nudité d'enfant et lentement
il étendit vers elle la tulipe en diamant de son sceptre
dont elle vint, défaillante, baiser le bout. (p.35)

In the second dream, Jacques has a vision of a world which has succumbed in its entirety to paralysis -- the moon. In the third, 'la Vérité' appears as a lubricious, but tortured whore, propositioning the heavens while straddling the tower of Saint-Sulpice. Like the nightmare in A rebours, these dreams seem intended (apart from anything else) to underline the points made in the rest of the book. Sickness will gradually run down the whole planet; sexuality -- or all human transactions perhaps -- is based on violation and prostitution. The dreams admittedly have an erotic element which one hardly observes in the description of cattle or aged peasants mating. Perhaps, however, this eroticism ultimately reinforces the pessimism of En rade: if in his waking life, Jacques struggles to withdraw from the revolting spectacle of the biological process, unconsciously he proves unable to reject and escape the attractions of desire, even if its negative results are still revealed. Nevertheless, even in the dreams, he has a passive role, as voyeur (the first) or victim (the third).

Manifestations of fecundity in the vegetable world are seen in an equally destructive light in En rade. The château's garden has reverted to nature, in other words submitted to a proliferating but unproductive anarchy (p.48 ff.). As Françoise Gaillard puts it,

Une hypertrophie de la génération mène à la dégénérescence, le surplus de la vie conduit à la mort... (23)

Even the harvest, which is vital and productive, is regarded dismissively:

C'était, sous un ciel d'un imitable bleu, des gens dépoitraillés et velus, puant le suint, et qui sciaient en mesure des taillis de rouille. Combien ce tableau semblait mesquin en face d'une scène d'usine ou d'un ventre de paquebot, éclairé par des feux de forges! (pp.174-75)

As Gaillard says, machines are outside the natural cycle; the man-made escapes biology. (24) This passage thus seems reminiscent of des Esseintes's project. However, it is worth noting that, although it may possess an aesthetic grandeur which Jacques fails to see in the fields, the world of industry or the mine is at the same time presented as a sombre inferno against which nature seems positively anodine (p.175).

The investigation of peasant behaviour by an outsider, one of the motivating forces of the plot of En rade, gives the book on one level the value of an anthropological study of a given milieu. In fact, this is the last novel in which Huysmans shows scrupulous concern for recording details external to his hero's private obsessions -- such as the oddities of peasants' speech (the ubiquitous ejaculation 'Ah ben c'était') (25), children's songs (pp.158-59), or even the behaviour of geese. But this study soon reveals a rejection of the biological process whose workings are too clearly displayed in rural life; the hero's dreams give this denunciation a universal value. To quote Gaillard:

Tout s'achemine vers la hideur et la gangrène. Un grand chancre ronge le vivant: la Grande Vérole apparue à des Esseintes dans un rêve halluciné, la même que la Vérité fantasmée par Jacques Marles en un cauchemar épouvantable. Vérole ou Vérité, deux monstres avariés qui incarnent la loi de l'échange, deux abominables goules qui propagent les germes de la mort. (26)

Huysmans' naturalist hero's existence is determined by this 'law of exchange'. Jacques Marles is forced to come to terms with the biological and socio-economic cycles which unite mankind; one cannot escape transactions with the world. A rebours shows that total retreat from the natural or social cycle is impossible. En rade, in the opposition between the peasants and Parisians, shows that only the first succeed in dealings with the outside world, precisely because, perhaps, they have no real inner life to be violated by a menacing exterior. The forces which devastate Jacques bounce off their leathery skins; the postman absorbs food which nauseates Jacques because beneath his caricatural exterior there is only a 'furnace'. Money, the means of economic exchange, again defeats Jacques, who is on the verge of bankruptcy; having hoped to withdraw from the effects of this law in the country, he is forced to concede that the demands of finance are also universal -- 'ici, l'argent est tout', as Louise says (p.162).

The 'horizontal' world thus proves irremediably hostile: displacing oneself to Fontenay-aux-Roses or Lourps finally exacerbates the problem. The vertical perspective which one also finds in En rade -- looking towards the interior, the mysteries of life beneath the putrid surface -- suggests an eventual outlet perhaps, but the solution is only proposed from La-bas onwards. In one sense, the 'interior' means not the workings of the soul, but the secure household -- a potential refuge, what Françoise Gaillard calls 'la chambre':

La chambre est pour Jacques Marles, comme pour tous les héros huysmansiens, le lieu de l'autorégulation sécurisante, un modèle d'économie domestique, contre la dépense désordonnée de la grande machine sociale. (27)

In fact the two senses of interior intermingle: just as des

Esseintes's retreat is brought down by the emergence of 'la névrose' from within himself, so too Jacques's and Louise's household is shown to collapse from the inside -- owing in part to Louise's illness (again called 'la névrose' (p.93), though in En rade the inadequacy of this term is more explicitly stated), but also to the destructive egotism which Huysmans bleakly describes in all human relationships.

The domestic aspects of En rade clearly take up many of the points already elaborated in En ménage. (28) The analysis of marriage, however, which occupies most of chapter six, seems intended to demonstrate the inevitability of failure in relationships, however sincere the participants -- whereas in En ménage. Berthe is shown to be basically incompatible with André, and Jeanne is removed from him by external circumstances. By En rade, Huysmans' pessimism has become particularly bitter, as he sets out once again to record the failure of marital life. Jacques's laments on the deterioration of his marriage in chapter six indicate that for him a wife is primarily a housekeeper, a manager of the 'domestic economy', whose principal role is to guard the husband against the onslaught of the world, 'le préservant, ainsi qu'une moustiquaire, de la piqure des petits riens' (p.119). He has carefully chosen a woman for whom he has to make no concessions, since she is without relatives, money, or ambition (p.119). Unfortunately Louise has failed in this function -- money, and presumably love with it, pours out of the fissure in the ruined 'ark' (p.116, p.118) -- and Jacques concludes his reverie by wondering how he might find a more competent replacement for the part of servant-cum-mistress (p.125).

Even Jacques realises the odiousness of these final

reflections ('je deviens simplement ignoble!' p.125). In order to suggest a sort of objective symmetry, the narrative then switches to his wife's perspective: she in turn unrolls a list of complaints against her husband, which correspond exactly to his against her and conclude with almost the same phrase: 'Ah! si c'était à refaire, comme elle ne se marierait pas!' (p.128, cf. p.125). These parallel thoughts then serve as a pretext for the narrator (who elsewhere is simply a voice that usually is content to record Jacques's perspective) to make a strange intrusion, proposing a theory of evil (reminiscent perhaps of Poe's 'Imp of the Perverse') (29) as a conclusion to this section, a theory which explains how even the noblest character may submit to the base desires which linger 'dans les latrines les plus dissimulées de l'âme' (p.130). In other words, Huysmans is prepared to discover hidden depths, mystery -- even diabolic agency (p.130) -- in what may appear to be a banal case of marital discord.

Yet one feels that Huysmans' interpretation of the evidence he presents is less than satisfactory. The book ends on a note of despair; Jacques sees catastrophe fatally proceeding on its course:

nous nous sommes trop froissés ici pour que jamais
le souvenir de nos mésestimes se perde! (p.260)

Unfortunately, the reader may be inclined to draw a different moral: not that disaster mysteriously overtakes even the noblest, but that two weak, egotistical characters who cling together for selfish reasons are quite likely to exacerbate their problems -- as indeed is the case. One's sympathy for Jacques's (or the author's) point of view, for example, is somewhat curtailed by an unintentional misogyny that frequently creeps into the text. Thus the passage

that sets husband's and wife's cases side by side soon appears to be biased against the female argument: the narrator cannot resist interrupting Louise's thoughts with the aside that, 'comme toutes les femmes', she thinks men owe her a living (pp.127-28). One does not, needless to say, find a similar gloss on Jacques's reduction of women to housekeepers. A more sinister passage at the end of chapter eleven reveals that women, no longer enhanced by the illusory halo created by sexual desire, are physically repellent; Jacques feels a certain disgust at having to share a room with his wife, whom illness has robbed of any attractiveness ('la tare originelle de la femme restait seule...' p.245).

An implicit moral -- or mystical -- condemnation of women lies behind the expression 'la tare originelle', with its Biblical overtones. The strange transformation which Jacques sees taking over his wife similarly brings us back to mystery. As the antagonism between them intensifies, Jacques discovers concrete evidence of his alienation from Louise: both in her attitudes and physical appearance she seems to be reverting to the manners of her peasant ancestors -- indeed 'il vit en Norine sa femme vieille et il en eut horreur' (p.190). Ironically enough, it is in the novels which traditionally are supposed to signal his rupture with naturalism, A rebours and En rade, that Huysmans insists most on the influence of heredity and environment in the development of his central characters. Louise has, as it were, succumbed to the effect of the peasant milieu she has moved into. (30) This metamorphosis adds a further element to the naturalist casebook which En rade draws up in the investigation of the interaction between peasants and Parisians: the dominant peasants finally subsume the weak

Parisian -- one possible solution to their conflict. But Jacques's horrified realisation also suggests a parallel which relates to the rejection of the biological process already observed: Louise, young but tainted by disease, and Norine, aged, vigorous, still endowed with an obscene sexuality, are actually seen to merge. Despite their differences, Louise will eventually become Norine. Young or old, the female principle is essentially horrifying -- and since women in Huysmans' novels are always intermediaries between man, who strives to retreat to his 'interior', and the outer world, and since in fact in the symbolic visions of A rebours and En rade female figure incarnate the principles which govern the world, in hideous, malignant form ('Pox' and 'Truth'), once again we observe a repudiation of nature behind this misogynic fusing of Louise and Norine.

Louise's illness has equally wide implications. H.A. Hatzfeld argues that disease is one of the central themes of naturalism, embracing the whole universe with its metaphorical tentacles. (31) This is certainly true of En rade. The central chapters of the book (five and six), for example, are devoted to a description of the moon -- a whole planet gripped by paralysis -- and of Louise's malady. (32) This malady, whose mysterious, changing symptoms, possible causes and treatment are discussed at length, exemplifies both the naturalist and spiritual aspects of the book. On the physical level, we are provided with an exemplar of the suffering flesh in the dying cat, whose agony represents the future course of Louise's symptoms (p.254). But at the same time the disease seems primarily neurotic or psychosomatic: outside events may trigger off the attacks (p.7), without there being any apparent organic malfunction. In other words, Louise's illness is

equivalent to Jacques's nightmares: both depend on an interaction between impressions received from the outer world and the workings of the unconscious, the soul, beyond the grasp of the conscious mind, which struggles in vain to explain these mysteries. Just as Jacques tries to probe his own psyche to understand his dreams (p.59ff., p.228), so the baffled doctors have 'descendus dans les cryptes du corps (de la malade)' (p.114).

Vadé's comment on the dreams in En rade is then potentially misleading:

Ce qui fait la nouveauté des rêves d'En Rade, c'est... leur rupture avec le discours narratif dans lequel ils sont insérés. (33)

He argues that by being deliberately unjustified, the intercalated episodes are meant to provoke reflection on the function of dreams, both in the reader and hero. In fact Vadé really means not that the dreams are gratuitous (as Huysmans himself concedes somewhat weakly to Zola), but intentionally enigmatic, ambiguously seeming to propose a solution while ultimately perhaps offering nothing:

Dans un monde cassé, ils peuvent... révéler une des lignes de faille du réel, et témoigner de l'étrangeté de l'homme à lui-même. Or Huysmans vit dans un monde cassé, mais il aspire à l'unité, à l'harmonie, au sens. (34)

At first sight, the dreams do seem to represent a rupture with the environs of the château de Lourps, particularly in the case of the first dream, which emerges completely unexpectedly: we have no idea we are seeing a simple manifestation of Jacques's unconscious, but on the contrary experience an expansion outwards in time and space, away from the decrepit, gloomy constrictions of the château just described into a palace apparently cut off from the corrupting forces of organic nature, since it consists entirely of metals and minerals which emit their own light (pp.30-31)(35)

This exoticism, as Vadé remarks, (36) harks back to the paintings by Gustave Moreau presented in A rebours, the three figures with their erotic ritual echoing the roles of Salomé, Herod and the eunuch. Elsewhere, dreams are described as 'ces vagabondages sur les territoires du délire' (p.181), in which the soul escapes from its prison (p.227).

Yet in fact the scene enacted in the dream of Esther reveals, beneath its exotic guise, exactly the same motivation as that discovered in peasant mores -- lust, brutality, violation. Esther is taken to Assuérus much as the cow is taken to the bull in chapter eleven. Similarly, the second dream at first suggests a temporal, spatial, or even cosmic leap: instead of putting up at Lourps, Jacques and Louise are touring the moon. Again, however, the vivid imaginativeness of the décor (the dreams are masterpieces of descriptive writing) is eventually seen to be continuing in a new setting the commentary established in the rest of the book. 'Nature' seems to have been banned from the moon:

il n'y a ni vapeur, ni végétation, ni terre, ni eau,
rien que des rocs et des coulées de lave... (p.100)

Thus Huysmans, having presented the rampant corruption of the organic at Lourps, contrasts it with this vision of a frozen, mineral landscape, unchanging, self-sufficient -- as in the first dream, the scene provides its own light (p.102). As Gaillard says,

La chronologie du récit de En Rade a sa logique: après la vision des désordres de nature, l'apparition de la lune qui a fixé son désordre en ordre éternel, après le déséquilibre de la prolifération du multiple, l'équilibre de la stagnation de l'homogène. (37)

Bachelard, in a chapter on 'La Rêverie pétrifiante', talks of a dialectic between 'la pierre et... la plaie' in Huysmans' work. (38) In this case, the 'dialectic' proves to be internal to the dream:

the moon itself is deeply wounded --

d'inguérissables plaies soulevaient de roses vésicules
sur cette chair de minerai pâle. (p.105)

The moon has not escaped disease -- its wounds are 'incurable' -- but suspended or frozen the attack by succumbing to a sort of catalepsy (pp.107-08). Putridity has been banned (p.104), but at the cost of submitting to 'le vide... le néant de l'arôme et le néant du bruit, la suppression des sens de l'odorat et de l'ouïe' (pp.104-05). Unsurprisingly, Jacques begins to feel 'l'angoisse prolongée du vide' (p.109) and that he himself is being drained of his living body. Death by paralysis replaces organic corruption; the only escape from the world is into nothingness.

This dream is further integrated into the narrative by the obvious parallels that are established between the state of the moon and Jacques's wife, as well as by a number of transitional points which the author does in fact place in the story. (39) Associations between the moon and femininity are of course traditional; at one point, Jacques, mixing naturalist physiology and magic, wonders if Louise's menstrual cycle is not the cause of his nightmares (according to Paracelsus, 'le sang régulier des femmes engendre des fantômes', p.228). Significantly, the lunar dream is the only one in which Louise herself appears, accompanying Jacques on his peregrinations, apparently untouched by the vertigo that afflicts him, and fatuously comparing the view with that from the terrace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (p.111). The 'indomptable mal' (p.93) which possesses Louise appears in fact to have overtaken a whole world in 'le mal sacré' (epilepsy) which grips the moon:

à la suite de quelle formidable compression d'ovaires
avait été enrayé le mal sacré, l'épilepsie de ce monde,
l'hystérie de cette planète...? (p.108)

The moon is at it were on a massive scale the victim of a malfunctioning female sexuality, a 'hysteria' to be cured in the fashion of Professor Charcot by compressing the ovaries, a demonstration of the irreversible destructiveness of the life cycle. (40) Once again we see how both the most literal and the most fantasmagoric aspects of En rade affirm, with an insistency that would be repetitive were it not for the variety which makes them appear to be superficially so different, the same nihilistic rejection.

If the second dream suggests that the only alternatives are organic degeneration or mineral paralysis and annihilation in a Godless universe (we see the 'indissoluble silence... d'un incompréhensible ciel', p.108), the reverie on ptomaïne in chapter nine, cast though it is in a humorous light which recalls the macabre fantasies of a Villiers de l'Isle-Adam or a Charles Cros, does at least offer a less pessimistic image of human mortality: thanks to the alkaloid ptomaïne which is produced by putrefying corpses (p.205), the 'essence' of the dead can be preserved in the form of perfumes or flavourings, and thus be consumed by the living. Huysmans discovers, as it were, a purified life cycle: a useful purpose can be found for the pustulence of the graveyard.... This burlesque variation on the notion of the 'odeur de sainteté' anticipates somewhat ironically a work like Sainte Lydwine in which Huysmans quite seriously tries to build a whole religious system round the conception of spiritual regeneration through physical degeneration.

This waking dream (p.210) is followed, without transition (except for a change of chapter), by the nightmare which concludes the series. With its occult overtones and vertiginous image of

Saint-Sulpice, the final dream patently looks forward to La-bas (where metaphors relating to heights and depths often appear); at the same time, the appearance of 'Truth' refers back to the kindred figure of the Fox in A rebours. And here Jacques is no longer simply a spectator observing the violation of Esther or a world, but like des Esseintes is himself menaced by a series of bizarre figures, in a sequence of several scenes. In other words, this dream is the most elaborate of the three, providing a climax, and consequently one expects its message to be the most far-reaching. Thus Vadé claims this last dream

màterialise le passage de l'ônirique au spirituel
et, dans un deuxième temps, à la symbolique. (41)

The succession of grotesques which Jacques encounters might suggest a colourful pageant in the manner of E.T.A. Hoffmann, were it not that their hideousness verges on the obscene and they seem to have some specific, but obscure role to play. Jacques is meant to surrender his watch to a hermaphroditic monster cooking up a Kabbalistic recipe (p.214), and his failure to do so causes catastrophe; Jacques has become a bellringer, assisted by a couple of strange musicians, a cul-de-jatte squatting in a bowl (a macabre play on words!) and his gross wife (pp.218-19). He finds himself in a gallery, from the floor of which emerge heaving, buttock-like pumpkins; to his terror, he hears the door being broken down:

Oh! ils étaient là derrière cette porte, tels qu'il les devinait sans les avoir jamais vus, les démons qu'implore, la nuit, l'aberration des filles qui se forment, les monstres en quête de cratères nubiles, les pâles et mystérieux incubes, au sperme froid! (p.217)

Perhaps what is most clear about these scenes is that they effect a transition between En rade and La-bas: an occult purpose is glimpsed, just behind the door, both fearful and appealing,

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and the tower of Saint-Sulpice re-appears insistently, with Jacques plunging vertiginously up and down it; but unlike the yearning adolescent girls, he fears violation ('*Demones exerçant cum magicis sodomiam*', p.217) and is unwilling or unable to surrender his watch -- to renounce, as it were, his place in the modern world, to accept the timeless domain of occult myth. Perhaps it is because he remains uncommitted and fails to recognise the 'truth' that Jacques is angrily assailed by the coachman ('*de mine patriarchale*', p.225) at the end of the dream.

But the only truth which is categorically affirmed is that Truth has been so shamelessly prostituted throughout the ages as to have no real value (the allegorical figure represents '*la grande Rouleure de l'esprit, la Traînée de l'âme*', p.224). Appearing first as a naked beauty whose eyes are alternately appealing, then mutilated (pp.221-22), the woman is hoisted into the sky by a jack impaled in her hip, '*son flanc crevé*' (p.223). In fact this perverted, crucified figure does not simply refer back to the horror of the Pox in A rebours but forwards to the sacred horror of the crucifixion presented at the threshold of La-bas: truth is on the point of being converted from a strident acclamation of universal sickness to something which, though equally tormented, bears the possibility of redemption.

In conclusion, then, En rade is a book that reveals a separation, but not the episodic division between real and fantastic which first strikes the reader. The investigation of the phenomena of the waking and sleeping worlds is carried out with a lurid insistence on the most brutal or grotesque aspects of human behaviour; but at the same time, the presentation

of Louise's illness, the dreams, the household, the affinities between Louise and the peasant Norine, all reveal a painful probing of the hidden forces which motivate the mind, social exchanges, and the whole process of life. (42) In a way, we move towards an intuition of occult correspondences: a peasant woman and a Parisienne, a diseased planet and a sick wife and cat, even an exotic Biblical fantasy and a farmyard scene begin to display mysterious parallels. Perhaps it is the Devil who possesses Louise (as the peasants fear, p.168) and who has driven a rift between husband and wife. But though Jacques Marles glimpses mysteries everywhere, the unity they seem to promise fails to emerge. Just as Huysmans, by exposing the myths of the countryside, produces nausea in his hero, so too Jacques Marles's attempts to penetrate the underside of life only exacerbate his alienation, from the world around him, his wife, and his own soul. From the outside, substance is caught in a process of garish putrefaction; the inside offers the choice between diabolic violation and the void. We are left with

l'anorexie d'une imagination terrestre qui refuse
les biens de la terre. (43)

La-bas continues this agonised delving into the fissures which have opened in the surface of reality, ruptured by the annihilating assault of naturalism. But though En rade reveals a unbearable sense of disunity, a feeling of being not simply 'mal dans sa peau' but 'mal dans la peau du monde', in purely structural terms the book is highly successful and tightly knit, thanks in part to the sense of correspondences outlined above, or to the unifying effect of certain pervasive images. (44) If once again Huysmans starts from a conventional genre novel,

writing his version of the 'roman rustique', En rade, though entirely lacking the epic breadth of a work like La Terre, looks forward to certain preoccupations of the twentieth century, exploring the self at bay not only with the pressures of a hostile world but with the forces of the unconscious mind. Apart from André Breton's appreciative assessment of the book, one thinks too, in a less portentous vein, of novels like Marcel Aymé's La Jument verte or La Vouivre, which similarly combine an astute and humorous observation of peasant behaviour with an awareness of the fantastic, mythic forces which act upon man in his confrontation with the natural world. And, finally, En rade can be appreciated because it is rather more readable than some of the other novels; the author's imagination flows uninterrupted by the catalogues which disrupt the texts of A rebours and La-bas.

But Huysmans' richest novel is La-bas, in terms of movement and variety in plot, characters and ideas. A rebours may well propose an encyclopedic investigation of culture, but essentially as a novel it is solipsistic and static: a series of brilliant prose poems cataloguing various subjects is set against a striving to withdraw from action, society, the world, into a hermetic retreat. En rade likewise is based on a global refusal of nature, or rather a desire to achieve a temporary equilibrium where nature can be held at bay. In La-bas, one finds the same negative posture towards the modern world, but at the same time, as the title indicates, a new expansiveness, a movement outwards, both chronologically (the Middle Ages appear as an alternative world) and metaphysically (there are perhaps motivating forces

behind the self-destructive cycles of nature -- be they incubuses, larvae, devils or microbes -- nature does perhaps fit into a scheme more laudible than that of eternal movement between fecundity and putrescence). Mysticism, mystery, and mystification begin to claim a significant place, and are perhaps wilfully confused.

The first chapter of the book, with its attack on naturalism, appears to propose a programme for a new novel, a novel which, one imagines, not only La-bas but also the religious works and even En rade are meant to illustrate. But the programme is hypothetical; while des Hermies is prepared to jettison most of the mainstays of naturalism (its materialism, democratisation of art, insistence on the sensual and physiological, I,5-7), the hero himself, Durtal, is much more cautious: his 'naturalisme spiritualiste', (I,11) far from being a genuine synthesis of conflicting forces, sounds more like an attempt to get the best of both worlds without fully appreciating the demands of either. Significantly, perhaps, the two paths he envisages run parallel, and thus never actually meet. If one tries to see how En rade might, retrospectively, exemplify the attempt to fuse naturalism and spirituality, one is forced to conclude that it is Huysmans' humour and imaginative inventiveness rather than any 'spiritual' message that make the book a success. What one sees is psychological rather than spiritual innovation in the presentation of marriage or dreams, in the subtle, sardonic comedy of human relations which anticipates the mixture of disillusion and expectation in Durtal's liaison with Mme Chantelouve. The discussion of La-bas, and in the next chapter of Huysmans' religious works, will try to determine whether he ever succeeds in holding together two poles that, at first sight, seem almost totally contradictory, and, if not, what the real outcome of the

attempt is.

One aspect of La-bas which often goes unmentioned is not the apparently self-reflexive nature of the book, but simply the fact that alone of Huysmans' novels it is actually an adventure story. (45) It may be compared to Les Faux-monnayeurs in the sense that both works rather narcissistically strive to embody a theory of fiction which is proposed within their texts, (46) but also because, unlike more recent versions of experimental fiction, both novels manage to capture the reader's imagination on the level of incident, deftly interweaving different events and characters without lapsing into gratuitousness or incoherence.

The plot of La-bas in fact recounts three sets of adventures: those of Gilles de Rais, the infamous fifteenth-century murderer and satanist; the entanglement of the hero Durtal with Mme Chante-louve, herself a practising satanist; and Durtal's further initiation into occult lore in the home of the bellringer Carhaix, who lives in the tower of Saint-Sulpice. The occult is of course a subject which itself is dangerously tempting -- not merely for the characters or author of La-bas, but for commentators on this and subsequent works by Huysmans, since it is hard to set aside one's own prejudices on the matter. Thus one critic, in an article which purports to discuss Huysmans' presentation of the Middle Ages, (47) by excessively quoting examples which reveal the novelist's penchant for the garishly marvellous or macabre beliefs of the time, manages to imply that Huysmans was a gullible nincompoop; while other commentators, on the contrary, feel obliged to inform the reader that they too believe in devils. (48)

Writing to Arij Prins, Huysmans remarked of La-bas:

Ce livre est presque en dialogues - c'est terrible - ça n'a plus l'air d'être écrit (...) au moins c'est neuf (...) c'est un sujet que personne, à l'heure actuelle, n'a abordé! (49)

Retrospectively, however, La-bas seems very much to have captured the literary and occult fashions of its day. (50) Jules Huret's investigation of contemporary literature, published in 1891 like La-bas, showed that naturalism had few remaining supporters. The positivist, materialist philosophy it was based on was discredited, said Édouard Rod. (51) Similarly, M. Raimond's analysis of the development of the novel between 1890 and 1914 shows that fiction generally was now dominated by various forms of 'escape' and more and more encroached on by different ideologies. (52) Huysmans' claim to originality of subject matter refers perhaps specifically to his treatment of satanism, rather than the supernatural more generally. A newspaper review of June 1891 on 'L'Évolution du roman naturaliste' points out how familiar the occult had become:

On sait de quel goût bizarre cette fin de siècle s'est éprise pour toutes les variétés de l'occultisme. Les spirites sont bien dépassés; nous avons des mages, des mystagogues, des théosophes, des bouddhistes, des kabbalistes, des astrologues, des évocateurs d'esprits. On ne parle que de maisons hantées et d'âmes voyageant en dehors de leur corps, à la volonté de magiciens qui n'ont même plus besoin de baguettes et de grimoires pour opérer leurs prodiges. (53)

And both naturalism and the occult claim a validity in 'science', this reviewer also points out: the gap between the two is therefore less wide than it may seem.

Paradoxically then, La-bas, with its rejection of modern history for medieval religious myth, actually seems to capture the spirit of its own age and has itself, ninety years on, become a historical document. In fact, this and subsequent works by Huysmans attracted a far wider readership than any of his earlier books; by 1893, La-bas had earned him about 10,000 francs (the equivalent of two years' salary) -- 'une des stupeurs

de ma vie'. (54) The apparent rejection of naturalism and the obsession with the occult or supernatural, the two features which gave the book its contemporary appeal, are still its most striking aspects, from the first chapter onwards. But before discussing whether the concept of a 'naturalisme spiritualiste' proves to be a key term for the ideas and structure of the book, it seems useful to begin with the characters since, apart from their psychological significance, it is their interaction on various levels which produces both the plot and the innumerable discursive passages of the book.

Robert Baldick describes La-bas as a 'livre à clé'. (55) The modern reader, however, who may still be curious to learn the identities of the literary figures vilified under thin disguises in a novel like Bloy's La Femme pauvre, is unlikely to be interested in such obscure models as Henriette Maillat, Charles Buet, the mysterious abbé Van Haecke, (56) the notorious ex-abbé Boullan: to linger on such 'identifications' only obfuscates the fictional worth of the characters in La-bas. Far more interesting, within the novel itself, is the interaction of real and fictional -- one of several parallels and oppositions which connect the characters. Gilles de Rais, a historical personage, is nominally presented only as he appears to imaginary characters; the history of his life, being written by Durtal, who has ostensibly given up writing novels, appears in various instalments throughout the novel, treated in a way that is as close to fiction as history; the adventures of Gilles are given an exemplary value outside history (or fiction) and at the same time are reflected, on a lesser scale, in the adventures or quest undertaken by Durtal,

within La-bas. But in addition, outside La-bas, Durtal has an exemplary value for Huysmans himself: the author's conversion is stimulated by the writing of La-bas. (57) and Durtal, having helped drive his creator to the Church, is retained in the last three Catholic novels -- though his role is considerably different.

The characters of La-bas form a triangle, with Durtal at the centre. They move in three different milieux -- the fifteenth century, fin-de-siècle Paris, and the belltower of Saint-Sulpice. One critic, indeed, has suggested that this tripartite division represents earth, heaven and hell (the ordinary torments of Durtal in his apartment contrasting with the quietude of Carhaix and the infernal domain of Gilles de Rais respectively). (58) But in reality, Tiffauges and Saint-Sulpice do not present such a simple, almost allegorical contrast. On the contrary, Durtal's alternating experiences in all three settings run parallel, and Huysmans never establishes such clear-cut absolutes of extreme good and evil, or of the natural and supernatural, between each milieu. Both Carhaix, with his ghastly pallor, and Gilles de Rais, passing from unimaginable atrocities to pious remorse, are unworldly characters: yet while Gilles eventually comes to terms with his world, Carhaix has been displaced, superseded; his profession and retreat are constantly menaced -- as the triumphant cries of the mob indicate at the end of the novel -- in a world where short-term political considerations defeat the eternal truths of faith. Moreover, Mme Chantelouve, society hostess though she may be, is equally unworldly, with her sinister claims that she can possess any man, dead or alive, at will. All three figures in fact force home on Durtal a sense of the overriding presence of the supernatural, the underside of religion, as though

wherever one turned mystery was inescapable. Thus he is initiated vicariously by his researches on Gilles de Rais, in a pedagogical fashion by the disquisitions at Carhaix's, and directly by Hyacinthe Chantelouve, when what starts as a sexual adventure leads again to satanism. Certain characters, such as des Hermies, Gëvingey or the infamous chanoine Docre, also provide connecting links; as does Durtal himself in his comparison of the characters of Gilles and Mme Chantelouve (chapter sixteen).

The three groups also have in common the fact that each is heavily dependent on external documentation. If, as Huysmans remarked, the novel 'est tout en conversations, en dialogues', (59) it is certainly not because the author has decided to give voice to his characters: there is no trace of the careful recording of popular or peasant speech found in the earlier novels. (60) Conversation does not reflect dramatic exchange (Huysmans' comment, 'Il y a des moments où ça prend des allures de théâtre' seems rather disingenuous), (61) but is a convenient way of proposing points of view or simply lectures on sundry matters which one speaker demands of another. In the first chapter, for instance, des Hermies and Durtal are given little substance as characters: all we observe is an alternation between two attitudes towards naturalism. Huysmans himself thought his documentation excessive ('Il y en a tant que le volume va craquer') (62) and complained that the book read like a lawyer's report. Even the anonymous love letters which Durtal receives were copied almost verbatim from letters sent to Huysmans by Henriette Maillat, with whom he had a short-lived liaison around 1886. (63) His information about the occult -- which aroused the derision of specialists like Papus or Péladan (64) -- was in large part

derived from the unfrocked priest Boullan.

But while the occult documentation does tend to explode incoherently across the pages of La-bas, so that a brutally cynical attitude towards the everyday world contrasts strangely with an avid desire to learn about the most improbable aspects of the beyond, Huysmans' presentation of Gilles de Rais is much more successfully integrated. Even if one finds the 'Catholic' interpretation which La-bas gives of the maréchal de Rais unconvincing, nevertheless the portrait is coherent and compelling. While Papus was able to comment scathingly on the dubious nature of many of Huysmans' documents, in this case the sources are perfectly reputable and in fact explicitly listed in the novel (I,34). Inevitably perhaps, Huysmans' account is indebted to the abbé Bossard's biography of 1885, at least for its factual information. (65) (He praises this work on II,29.) However, the interpretation imposed on the facts is original: Huysmans' insistence on what he calls Gilles's 'mysticism' is not found in Bossard or, for that matter, in Georges Bataille's more recent account -- Bataille sees Gilles as a 'dévot superstitieux', emphasising the social causes of his crimes. (66) Similarly, Huysmans seems to have invented an episode such as Gilles's delirious vision in the forest (chapter eleven) for his own purposes, as a note in the 'Carnet vert' indicates. (67)

Nevertheless, a comment by Bossard provides a useful opening perspective on Huysmans' Gilles de Rais:

tout dans sa vie peut se résumer en ces deux mots
qui le caractérisent, spectacle et sensation. (68)

As Durtal jokingly says, 'Il était le Des Esseintes du XVe siècle!' (I,77). It may seem strange, or even presumptuous, to reduce a real-life mass murderer to the level of a fictional

character; but like des Esseintes, Gilles is seen as an aesthete, a bibliophile and man of culture in an age when few of his peers were even literate, spending his entire fortune in eight years on extravagant displays (chapter four), a dandy on a grand scale, able at the same time to conduct his quest for the absolute in spheres forbidden to the nineteenth century with its materialist, humanitarian considerations. Gilles is a successful realisation of des Esseintes's failures: while the latter is driven back from the extremes of human experience he strives to attain by his moral and physical weaknesses, and by the pressures of his age which refuses both excesses of cruelty and piety, Gilles de Rais, at one with his time, where humanitarian interests count for little, is in a sense able to enjoy the limits of good and evil, of self-indulgence and degradation.

One can understand Huysmans' gleeful enthusiasm for this horrific figure better if one keeps this contrast with A rebours in mind. Visiting Tiffauges in 1889, he writes jubilantly to Odilon Redon:

Les ruines de son château sont formidables et chacune des oubliettes qu'on ouvre, renferme encore les ossements des enfants qu'il violait et égorgeait, en invoquant le Diable! (69)

There is certainly a sadistic complaisance in the descriptions of Gilles's atrocities (which even a recent biographer prudently refuses to describe) (70) a lingering on the aesthetics of torture rather in the fashion of Mirbeau's Le Jardin des supplices -- when, for instance, Gilles holds a macabre beauty contest with the decapitated heads of his victims (II, 15). As Colin Wilson suggests, in an unsympathetic assessment of La-bas in his popularising study The Occult, there is a disturbing lack of awareness of human suffering in such descriptions:

One senses a curious immaturity in Huysmans's interest in Gilles; when he describes him disembowelling children and masturbating on their intestines, he is not really aware of the horror of the subject; it strikes him as bizarre, freakish and therefore fascinating. (71)

But Wilson fails to see that this cruelty is more than an example of fin-de-siècle sadism; one of the main attractions of the Middle Ages is precisely the period's 'childishness' (the age is 'plus naïf et moins bête' than modernity, II,234); suffering need not be seen in complicated humanitarian terms, but as part of a pure metaphysical spectacle. Once Gilles's soul is purified, his crimes count for nothing; he can pass from an extreme of evil to good and sincerely expect, without presumption, to be received into Paradise (II,144). As Max Milner argues, (72) Huysmans attempts to show that evil for the Christian is a mystical rather than an ethical concept; sin is not the infraction of a law, but the refusal of love, of God or of one's neighbour.

Nevertheless, one cannot help feeling that such attempts at demonstrating theological points tend to be somewhat one-sided. A reader who fails to share the extreme 'Catholic' viewpoint displayed in the treatment of Gilles de Rais can propose a rather different interpretation of the evidence presented in La-bas. (In this context, one thinks too of the mocking reductio ad absurdum of the Catholic notion of repentance in 'Le Juif latin', Apollinaire's story about a penitent sadist in L'Hérésiarque et cie.) Throughout the novel, in the presentation of Gilles de Rais, (73) there is an insistence on his duality, his 'volte-d'âme' (I,67):

le plus artiste et le plus exquis, le plus cruel
et le plus scélérat des hommes, (I,34)
dont l'âme était

and his mysticism: 'un homme / saturée d'idées mystiques' (I,72).

In fact, having divided Mme Chantelouve into three parts (a

respectable salon lady, a shameless whore in bed, a satanist, II,95), Durtal similarly observes three separate characters in Gilles: a pious soldier; an 'artiste raffiné et criminel'; a fervent penitent (II,96). Yet this analysis is unconvincing. It may seem odd, for example, that Huysmans, whose hostility to the army is evident from Sac au dos onwards, should be willing to grant Gilles his military glory (though of course he is a genuine warrior, rather than a reluctant conscript). One could argue that Gilles may well have acquired his taste for blood when it was legitimised ^{in battle}. Durtal himself points out the brutalities of the age, and Gilles's penchant for stringing up renegades when he was a military commander (I,84). More serious objections, however, can be made against the concept of Gilles's 'mysticism'. Though there seems little doubt that he was guilty of his crimes (even if the partisans of the view that he was innocent apparently included Voltaire), (74) nevertheless the evidence against Gilles comes almost entirely from his own confession at his trial. While Huysmans makes this confession the mainstay of his demonstration of Gilles's transition from evil to good, sacrilege to piety, the reader cannot help observing a continuity in the *maréchal's* behaviour: the excess of his remorse matches the excess of his sadistic frenzy; more sinisterly, the appallingly detailed confession of his atrocities (all the subsequent accounts are based on Gilles's own description of his crimes, so that he is their author in both senses) enables him to relive them, exchanging the voluptuousness of torture for that of repentance, and enjoying in addition the 'spectacle et sensation' he produces before his dumbstruck audience. Unlike Simone de Beauvoir's Sade, Gilles de Rais is finally able to gain

public sanction for his pleasures and die in glory: for the Middle Ages, good and evil do seem to be virtually interchangeable. (75)

The characterisation of Gilles de Rais, then, seems ultimately tendentious: psychology is less important than spectacle, than a deliberately schematic presentation which makes a theological demonstration of supposedly medieval virtues more important than contemporary notions of the relativity or continuity of human behaviour. Huysmans wants to see Gilles in terms of absolutes, not as a social deviant or psychopath. Nevertheless, the picture tends to be more nostalgic than true: La-bas is actually far from rejecting the 'scientific' notions of the modern world. Huysmans' presentation of good and evil, moreover, seems essentially contradictory: they are both the same --

du Mysticisme exalté au Satanisme exaspéré, il n'y a qu'un pas. Dans l'au-delà, tout se touche (I,82) --

but also 'aux deux pôles opposés de l'âme' (I,176), and still more irrevocably opposed to 'la bourgeoisie de l'âme' of the nineteenth century (I,188). The explanation is that Huysmans sees good and evil in two different lights: along the horizontal axis, so to speak, they are at opposite ends; but on the vertical axis, which separates modern mediocrity from the medieval 'au-delà', they merge. Nevertheless, this produces a certain confusion between good and evil -- both seem to depend on extremes and excess more than anything else. This outlook may seem profoundly anti-humanitarian and irrational; but there is also an opposing, rationalist movement in La-bas.

The characterisation of Mme Chantelouve, the other main figure in the novel apart from Durtal himself, may appear even more schematic or caricatural than that of Gilles de Rais. With

her smouldering green eyes (II,84), her sinister laughter (I,193), her claim to be able to possess Byron, Baudelaire, Nerval and Durtal at will (I,246), her ghoulisn embrace (II,45), her boast that she has driven her first husband to suicide (II,85), she is a fearsome, grotesque figure, certainly worthy of the Fatal Women chronicled by Mario Praz, (76) a she-wolf as her name with its vampirical undertones suggests, both erotically enticing and morally repellent. If Gilles de Rais is seen as a figure both monstrous and grandiose, able, thanks to the spirit of the Middle Ages, to oscillate between absolutes of good and evil, Mme Chantelouve is certainly not a modern equivalent of Gilles (this role probably falls to Durtal himself, though in the prevailing climate of the nineteenth century, his occult experiences verge on the absurd or sordid), but rather an incarnation of all the ambiguities of femininity, desirable as a source of mystery (the enticing letters) and as a key to mystery (the initiator into satanism), yet also dominating and destructive.

Huysmans himself remarks in Certains that Woman is traditionally an initiating figure in the black arts. (77) At the same time, in all Huysmans' works, woman serves as a buffer for man against the world, as R.-P. Colin correctly points out:

La femme, mère et maitresse, est la médiatrice obligée entre le monde et lui. (78)

In a letter to Gil Blas apropos of a debate initiated by Strindberg on women's role in society, Huysmans stated bluntly that their function was to provide sex and 'bons soins'. (79) This attitude is clearly reflected in La-bas. According to

Marie-Thérèse Dressay, in an excellent analysis of the function of women in La-bas:

la femme peut se révéler bonne et utile, sinon nécessaire, jamais EN SOI mais POUR l'homme, lorsqu'elle assume la part matérielle propre à l'humain en lieu et place de l'homme, lorsqu'elle aménage l'univers du Plein à l'intention d'aspirations qu'elle est incapable de partager. C'est le cas exemplaire de Mme Carhaix, qui épargne au sonneur les servitudes du ménage, et celui des prostituées, ces 'vidangeuses d'âme'. (80)

'Misogyny' is evidently too sweeping and vague a term to describe Huysmans' attitude. 'La maman Carhaix' is seen in positive terms, but as Dressay aptly puts it:

C'est en effet en tant que bonne femme que Mme Carhaix est une femme bonne. (81)

Opposed to Mme Carhaix, self-effacing guardian of the household, unable and unwilling to participate in the menfolk's erudite discussions, is the strident Hyacinthe Chantelouve, destroyer of the household (her first husband has killed himself, her second is a complaisant cuckold), an aggressor both sexually and in the occult domain. One feels that if Durtal's brutal rupture with her immediately after the Black Mass seems proof of a quite unscrupulous ingratitude -- she has served her purpose and so he rejects her -- in a sense, all the same, he has little choice: Mme Chantelouve has infringed the role reserved for women in Huysmans' novels and thus cannot be tolerated.

Perhaps because the ambiguity of Durtal's relations with Mme Chantelouve is related to the idea of 'naturalisme spiritualiste', or more precisely, to a whole series of ambivalent motifs running through La-bas which this slogan rather vaguely encapsulates -- the flesh and the spirit, scepticism and mystery, science and the supernatural, imagination and reality, desire and disgust -- this character eventually becomes more than a

castrating femme fatale. The bedroom scenes, which combine a poignant melancholy at the failure of love or desire with a grating, derisive cynicism, certainly reveal a horror of an emasculating female sexuality, as Durtal recoils from 'ces yeux sulfureux, cette bouche spoliatrice, terrible' (II,84) (following a discreet reference to fellatio, II,82). Mme Chantelouve's sexual voracity is part of her satanism: she violates both Durtal and the Host after the Black Mass. In En route, the prostitute Fernande appears quite simply as a diabolical temptress: the social, emotional investigation of the prostitute's condition of Marthe is forgotten for a view which makes purveyors of sex agents of Satan. But this bizarre simplification is not found in La-bas. Durtal's sexual inadequacy (Mme Chantelouve finally informs him, cuttingly, 'mon coeur gante plus grand', II,206) stems from the alienation of 'spirit' and 'flesh', or senses and soul, which is presented from the discussion in the first chapter onwards (the new naturalism, rather than achieving a synthesis which seems purely utopian, more probably strives to express the terms of this alienation, which includes a dissatisfaction with a way of writing which itself falls short of the absolute). The rest of the novel, like this chapter, presents these two halves of man as being sundered. One should emphasise this disunity: Huysmans' terminology insists on separation and duality, so that the desire for union perforce remains on the level of hypothetical aspiration and nostalgia -- be it in terms of a theory of the novel or history.

In M.-T. Dressay's view, in La-bas man represents the spirit and woman the flesh:

C'est pourquoi Durtal se sent si mal à l'aise face à une femme, -- parce qu'elle est la présence de sa propre

réalité sensible, avec laquelle il tend, intérieurement, à rompre. Le besoin d'amour sexuel qu'il perçoit bien, il l'éprouve comme un appétit qui contredit l'idée qu'il se fait de lui-même et qui l'aiguillonne sans répit. (82)

In other words, Durtal actually tries to separate the sensual from the spiritual within himself (which contradicts the message of the opening chapter if one reads it simply as a manifesto for 'unity'), as one sees from his reflections at the beginning of chapter fourteen (II,55), or from an elaborate metaphor concerning sex and the prostitute:

depuis des années (...) (il) se contentait de mener le dégoûtant troupeau de son péché dans des abattoirs où les bouchères d'amour l'assommaient d'un coup... (I,149)

This bizarre image suggests that sensuality can quite literally be driven out of the self, and indeed annihilated, drained away by a prostitute. (83) But Durtal's reflections (in chapter fourteen, for example) essentially express a regret that this division is not possible. As des Hermies sardonically remarks, 'tout amour de coeur finit par l'organe qui lui ressemble' (II,56) -- the penis. Sex is symbolically present everywhere: in the thrusting pistons of the factory (II,56), or the phallic trunks and vaginal orifices of the forest (II,19ff.), or the macabre ritual of the Black Mass. Ultimately Durtal yearns for total separation from the corporeal (e.g. II,47-48), to attain a state of mystic rapture, but, paradoxical as it may seem, expects to achieve this transcendence through a love affair with Mme Chantelouve:

il en venait à croire, contre toute expérience, contre tout bon sens, qu'avec une femme passionnée comme celle-là semblait l'être, il éprouverait des sensations quasi surhumaines, des détonations neuves! (I,149-50)

Of course he is deceived by the flesh (as Hyacinthe predicts, 'la réalité tuera le rêve', I,196) and left in a state of

desolate discontinuity.

To conclude this discussion on characterisation, it becomes clear that the figures in La-bas are better seen as vehicles for certain ideas and investigations than as psychological studies: Mme Chantelouve and Gilles de Rais as individuals verge on the monstrous, des Hermies is a useful debating partner, Gévingey a supplier of occult lore, and so on. Even Durtal, whose adventures finally take up some 1,600 pages, is a diffuse figure. While Folantin, André or des Esseintes are endowed with biographies, families, Christian names, Durtal (84) emerges at the age of forty virtually without a history or background, quite evidently Huysmans' window on the world. In La-bas, he is seen only once as a physical presence, when he glimpses himself in a mirror, briefly invigorated by desire for Hyacinthe (I,201). His personality dominates the book so much that it virtually dissolves: he is less a 'character' than a mind, whose ideas and experiences are those, not of an individual, but of the text. The complexities and inconsistencies of Durtal are those of La-bas itself. It seems appropriate, then, to move from character to consider the movement of ideas in the novel.

Just as the first chapter of the novel is dominated by the discussion on naturalism, followed by Durtal's monologue on the Primitives and Grünewald and his reverie on money, with little apparent attempt at delineating character, or setting a story in motion, (85) so too certain critics have complained that the novel as a whole is swamped by an excess of ideas, or rather an ill-digested documentation. The most vociferous of these commentators is undoubtedly Léon Bloy, who by 1891 had

become an implacable foe of the author:

Je ne crois pas que l'incirconcision littéraire ait encore affiché un aussi furieux dévergondage d'informations anarchiques.

Cette oeuvre est un fatras inouï, une bagarre, une bousculade, un pêle-mêle, un cataclysme de documents, car le célèbre écrivain se manifeste plus que jamais comme une cataracte du ciel documentaire. (86)

Rather inconsistently, Bloy simultaneously accused his former friend of plagiarising most of his information from 'Le divulgateur d'Absolu', as he modestly dubbed himself. More recent critics are divided: while Thérive claims that Huysmans' documentation is successfully integrated, Kanters maintains the opposite, for example. (87)

What is most strikingly obvious in La-bas, it is true, is a penchant not only for facts pertaining to the more recondite and bawdy aspects of magic and religion (a eunuch may be ordained a priest, so long as he carries his mutilated parts about his person in powder, we learn (I,157); an incubus has a bifurcating penis which 'au même moment, pénètre dans les deux vases' (I,226)), facts usually treated humorously (just as in A rebours we are told that lettuces can be used to test a girl's virginity (p.252)), but also for a frenzied cruelty which demands more serious consideration. As Pierre Cogny points out, there are actually two spectacles of horror in La-bas: the atrocities Gilles de Rais inflicts on his victims are matched by the agony endured by the expiatory victim, Grünewald's Christ. (88) Whether, as Cogny claims, one illustrates 'la mystique blanche' and the other 'la mystique noire', or not, the initial impression made on the reader in each case is identical: an anguished^{display} of physical torment, described in complaisant detail. The hideous Christ of the first chapter has been reduced to the state of a

putrescent piece of meat:

L'heure des sanies était venue; la plaie fluviale du flanc
ruisselait plus épaisse, inondait la hanche d'un sang
pareil au jus foncé des mûres; des sérosités rosâtres,
des petits-laits, des eaux semblables à des vins de Moselle
gris, suintaient de la poitrine... (I,15)

The culinary images in particular (blood as blackberry juice,
pus as whey or Moselle) make this spectacle of a Christ crucified
like 'le boeuf écorché' lovingly described in the early prose
poem 'Claudine' far more disturbing than chanoine Docre's
intentionally blasphemous, leering ithyphallic Christ which
presides over the Black Mass. Yet this passage is meant, not
as decadent blasphemy, but as a demonstration of the integration
of spirit and flesh, of the validity of the Passion and
Incarnation.

It has already been suggested that Huysmans can only see
the 'au-delà' in terms of extremes and excess: intensity of good
and intensity of evil are barely distinguishable -- what counts
is intensity. This notion is common enough among authors who
subscribe to a decadent Catholicism; one thinks of Baudelaire's
'Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?', or Barbey d'Aurevilly:

l'enfer, c'est le ciel en creux. Le mot diabolique ou
divin, appliqué à l'intensité des jouissances, exprime
la même chose, c'est-à-dire des sensations qui vont
jusqu'au surnaturel. (89)

Both Grünewald's Christ and Gilles de Rais's crimes certainly
show extremes of sensation, and both seek to enact a mystical
transmutation. While Christ assumes the sins of the world,
Gilles de Rais too appears as more than a demented torturer:
having sought, and failed to find, the philosopher's stone, the
key to the universe (e.g. I,134), he carries out his murders in
part as an attempt to make contact with Satan, offering human
sacrifices to the spirit of evil, his frenzy ever increasing as

these experiments again fail to produce supernatural manifestations (e.g. II,7-8). But whereas the 'diabolical' aspects of the 'au-delà' are treated with a certain ambiguity in the case of Gilles de Rais (Gilles may be possessed unwittingly by the Devil (I,174): if this notion seems in one sense a throwback to medieval superstition, in another, with the idea of the internalisation of evil, the control of behaviour by unconscious forces, it looks forward to Freud), (90) the transfiguration of Grünewald's Christ is stated with a directness which it is hard to come to terms with.

Huysmans insists relentlessly on the physical agony and repulsiveness, and also the moral ignominy of the Christ in Grünewald's painting ('crever ainsi qu'un bandit, ainsi qu'un chien', I,18). (Certain art critics apparently reject Grünewald's work precisely because of this caricatural abjectness.) (91) What strikes Durtal when he first cries with astonishment on seeing the painting in the museum at Cassel (92) is its heightened, bloodcurdling realism ('Grünewald était le plus forcené des réalistes', I,18), which makes the transformation and revelation of the spiritual, of the 'céleste Superessence' (I,19), all the more startling.

Dans cette toile, se révélait le chef-d'oeuvre de l'art acculé, sommé de rendre l'invisible et le tangible, de manifester l'immondice éplorée du corps, de sublimer la détresse infinie de l'âme. (I,19) (93)

The invisible, by definition, can only be rendered symbolically; yet Huysmans' transformation seems to be meant literally: the invisible and the tangible exist on equal terms; it is as though the body, when driven to its limits, quite literally forces the soul to emerge, as though substance when squeezed sufficiently produces spirit. Thus is seen in all the Primitives

une transformation de la matière détendue ou comprimée,
une échappée hors des sens, sur d'infinis lointains. (I,13)

This process seems close to Gilles de Rais's alchemical investigations, his probing and torturing of matter.

Gilles de Rais's murders are first motivated by an insatiable urge to rend human flesh ('se sentant en appétit, le Maréchal (réclama) son souper charnel', II,12). But his atrocities are soon seen in aesthetic terms (decapitated heads lined up in a macabre beauty contest, II,15), are 'spiritualised' (II,16). Yet these paroxysms of cruelty still lead nowhere. He is duped by Satan: 'Il haletait, insatiable, devant le vide...' (II,17). The spectacle of cruelty offered by Grünewald seems then to be the reverse of Gilles's experience: the crucifixion claims to offer both a mystic revelation and also a potential aesthetic model -- showing how body and spirit can be fused, realism preserved and transcended. Suffering, of course, has to be freely accepted by the expiatory victim to have a positive spiritual value; thus Gilles himself, after his repentance, can also be presented as a sort of mystic. In other words, the transformation which Durtal sees enacted in Grünewald's painting depends not on art, but an act of faith -- an act of faith not simply on the part of the participants in the Passion who are depicted, but also, one may feel, on the part of the reader of La-bas. The presentation of the crucifixion only really achieves its effect if one accepts the religious doctrines it embodies. Surely Gilles's experience does show that matter alone, however much it is 'comprimée', produces nothing: mysticism in fact stems from an acceptance of Christian mystery, not from any form of naturalism.

Gilles de Rais's excesses are a final, extreme statement of the exploration of the material world -- the world literally reduced to 'material' as the ogre's prey -- which forms the basis of naturalism. Gilles devours and sunders the world by reducing his victims to objects (for sexual or aesthetic pleasure); but his destruction of human 'material' is at the same time a quest for spirit, for a means of escape, via God or Satan. He exemplifies the paradox of the sadistic torturer, as defined by Simone de Beauvoir, (94) who, in an attempt to penetrate the subjectivity of his victims, reduces them to objects, thus apparently cancelling out his own intentions. Furthermore, while Satan remains absent, the world Gilles tries to liquidate finally overwhelms him in his hallucinatory visions in the forest of Tiffauges (chapter eleven) -- visions which take up the succession from the nightmares in A rebours and En rade, since, once again, the character is assailed by a nature presented in the form of obscene sexuality (the phallic, vaginal shapes of the trees, the swollen breasts and buttocks of the clouds), a sexuality which is hideously diseased ('une maladrerie de la terre, une clinique vénérienne d'arbres', II,21).

Gilles de Rais fails in his enterprise to conquer the goods of this world (the philosopher's stone which he seeks not only transmutes base metals, thus granting endless riches, but cures all ills, giving eternal life, I,134). Satan is the evil force behind the material world (in chapter one it is suggested that money or capital, the motivating forces of the modern world, are the work of the Devil), but he remains enticingly elusive -- mysteriously beating two of the Marshal's associates (I,131-32), but refusing to appear to Gilles. In fact, as Max Milner argues,

Satan is not simply absent in person, but an absence in La-bas: lack of love or compassion (hence Gilles's unimaginable cruelty), an intangible force which possesses Gilles without his knowledge or even manipulates the economy of capitalist society.... (95)

At the same time, however, one notes a similar absence of positive forces for good in La-bas: Huysmans' Christ does not appear as a glorious Saviour, enhancing mankind through the power of his charity, but as a degraded, rejected figure, physically defiled by taking on the sins of the world. One might well argue that the 'spiritual' plane as a whole exists as an absence in La-bas: what is constantly presented amounts to a series of highly physical spectacles -- the torments of the crucifixion, the roll-call of Gilles de Rais's crimes, the hysterical erotomania of the Black Mass, all presented in lurid sensual detail. In Milner's view, the novel expresses

l'angoisse d'un manque fondamental, la conviction que si la littérature manque le réel, c'est parce que le réel (...) ne peut être présent dans la littérature et dans l'art en général que comme manque. (96)

As has already been observed, the objects of Huysmans' naturalist world are the opposite of 'real' used in this sense: steaks turn out to be 'illusory' under the fork, and in A vau-l'eau the adulteration of food metaphorically suggests a universal loss of values -- 'tout fiche le camp', everything collapses when probed. In La-bas, normally the real is either flawed (and thus unreal) or unattainable -- as the title itself indicates. What is most real in La-bas (in other words, what offers the most authentic source of value) is often what is most removed from the reality of everyday experience. Thus a 'real' love affair would be free from all sensual contact, according to Durtal:

Il n'y a que ces amours réelles et intangibles, ces amours faites de mélancolies éloignées et de regrets qui valent! (II,52)

Constantly, in fact, he prefers imaginary experience to the actuality of his day and age (whose inescapable presence of course prevails with the cries of the electioneering mob at the end of the novel). He approaches both Gilles de Rais and Mme Chantelouve through writing, vicariously enjoying Gilles's experience of evil and becoming infatuated with his unknown correspondent through an exchange of letters when fictitious sentiments become genuine. While Durtal seems at best indifferent to the real, non-symbolic suffering of Gilles's victims, he is able to transmute a painting of the Passion into a mystical statement -- for Grünewald's message is perceived through or rather created by an aesthetic filter. The physical presence of Mme Chantelouve, on the other hand, or personal participation in a Black Mass, are seen as degrading and disgusting. (97)

Thus, paradoxical as it may seem, in the materialist context of naturalism, what is 'absent' is in a sense felt to be most real -- be it the Middle Ages as opposed to modernity, idealised love as opposed to sexual congress, or, in Grünewald's painting, the possibility of redemption beyond a frenzied image of degradation.

But mystery remains more important than true mysticism in La-bas. That is to say, the novel reaches out towards these absent forces without really grasping them. The circularity of the plot -- Durtal begins and ends on the book standing on the threshold of Catholicism -- is matched by a constant oscillation between a brutal summing-up of the failings of the nineteenth century and a probing of mystery, where the tone ranges from humorous scepticism to a naivety which is probably intentional. It is important to realise that Huysmans does not reject naturalism, positivism or rationalism in La-bas. In his famous letter to the

ex-abbé Boullan of 7 February 1890, where he states:

je suis las des théories de mon ami Zola, dont le positivisme absolu me dégoûte. Je ne suis pas moins las des systèmes de Charcot, qui a voulu démontrer que la démonialité était une rengaine, que, lui, développait ou matait, en pressant sur les ovaires, le satanisme des femmes traitées à la Salpêtrière, (98)

his actual project is to 'confondre tous ces gens' -- positivists and occultists alike -- by uniting their respective viewpoints in a 'naturalisme spiritualiste'. Naturalism alone is inadequate, as the first chapter of La-bas repeats. But 'spiritualisme' is never fully realised: the protagonist approaches the 'unknown', begins to investigate it, and retreats without a satisfactory answer. This pattern becomes extremely common in all the later novels as well as La-bas, springing from a hesitation, a desire to reconcile rational explanation of the world with what is only 'explicable' through an act of faith: the result is a continual circling round the supernatural, a 'rabâchage' of the same problem. (99)

This circularity or repetitiveness helps explain some of the apparently contradictory attitudes present in La-bas. Huysmans himself has been criticised often enough for his supposed gullibility regarding the supernatural and the nefarious Boullan, who supplied him with much of his documentation. (100) Certainly contemporary accounts, such as that of a séance at the author's flat in 1892 (101) or of his faith in 'pâte à exorcisme' when he thought he was under attack from evil spirits sent out by the Rosicrucians, (102) tend to play up Huysmans' credulity in a burlesque fashion. In La-bas itself, however, this preoccupation with mystery can verge on what seems deliberate mystification. Are we meant, for instance, to take Durtal's disquisition on money in chapter one seriously, when he tries to demonstrate that following 'une loi organique atroce' (I,23) it is controlled

by the Devil? One might alternatively see this passage as social satire, comically reversing cause and effect: money is made into an active, diabolical agency in order to explain, or rather emphasise, men's mercenariness and baseness when given financial power. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of La-bas is to create a strange discrepancy between the scepticism applied towards ^{certain} spheres (usually modern) and the openness to all revelations of the marvellous, however improbable.

It seems ironical, for example, that Durtal should reject documents as specious in historical enquiry (I,30), while eagerly attending to the supposedly documented evidence of satanic practices presented during the discussions at Carhaix's. Thus in chapter five, des Hermies tells him that 'les documents sont irréfutables' (I,99) which prove the existence of satanism throughout the ages, and proceeds with a lurid potted history, where interminable enumeration of ludicrous or grotesque details stands as 'proof' (one devilish association has managed to pollute 3,320 hosts in twenty-five years; contemporary satanism has even been bureaucratised, with committees, sub-committees, its own Curia, I,106-07). In fairness to Durtal and his creator, one should point out that the most far-fetched anecdotes and incidents are communicated through the character Gévingey, an astrologer who is bewitched by the infamous Docre and saved by Doctor Johannes (he recounts the epic battle for his salvation in chapter twenty). Durtal reacts with some disbelief to such accounts ('Décidément, cet astrologue est fêlé, se dit-il', I,231), but nevertheless the fact of describing such details implies a certain credence. One notices, besides, that Durtal's interpretation of facts relating to mystery may be biased in

favour of supernatural interpretations: thus he accepts that Gilles's associates Prélati and the unnamed sorcerer were given a beating by the Devil, although one might suspect their wounds were self-inflicted (I,131ff.).

Here too one observes that Durtal is ready enough to bring in 'scientific', rationalistic arguments if they help support his case. The documents describing these beatings are 'authentiques' (I,133); the magicians' behaviour is compared to that of patients in the asylum at Bicêtre -- for, since their symptoms are different, we can freely assume diabolic intervention. In fact, though he may sneer at the spurious 'scientific' methods of writers such as Rosny (I,8) or historians, Huysmans himself is not averse to making scientific analogies which seem equally tendentious. He cites Berthelot and modern theories of the elements in defence of alchemy (I,126,134) (adding, somewhat less plausibly, that Spinoza and Helvétius succeeded in transmuting lead into gold). This comparison may seem legitimate; but the same can hardly be said of an analogy put in Gévingey's mouth:

L'espace est peuplé de microbes; est-il plus surprenant qu'il regorge aussi d'esprits et de larves? (I,216) (103)

Huysmans has no real desire to reduce spirits to the level of natural phenomena invisible to the human eye, to fit them into a scientific explanation of the world: the attraction of the supernatural lies precisely in the fact that it surpasses such approaches.

Normally science is treated with scorn for its presumptuous failure to realise its own inadequacies. Thus des Hermies points out the insufficiencies of Charcot's diagnosis of 'la grande hystérie': the symptoms may be clear, but the cause remains unknown:

une femme est-elle possédée parce qu'elle est hystérique,
ou est-elle hystérique parce qu'elle est possédée?
L'Eglise seule peut répondre, la science pas. (I,233) (104)

Positivism cannot deal with such conflicts between body, nerves
and soul:

le mystère est partout et la raison bute dans les ténèbres,
dès qu'elle veut se mettre en marche. (I,234)

But while apparently rebutting medicine and science (good and evil
are simply beyond their domain, I,176), Huysmans himself with his
painstaking insistence on documents, his frequent use of scientific
analogy and terminology (the participants in the Black Mass form
'un véritable sérail d'hystéro-épileptiques et d'étheromanes',
II,173), and rationalistic probing of the irrational, seems to
be forever returning to the positivist base he claims he wishes
to free himself from. These two conflicting urges -- to leave
mystery as mysterious and acknowledge the separateness of the
supernatural, or alternatively to penetrate and 'document' it
even while admitting the invalidity of such documentation (105) --
seem to indicate that the notion of 'naturalisme spiritualiste'
is inherently contradictory, or, at best, produces a strange
oscillation between two rather different views of the world.

If Huysmans proves to be rather more dependent than one
might think on the positivist outlook, so too his position
concerning the modern world cannot simply be described as one
of total rejection. Admittedly, the novel is hostile towards
history, either in the form of the social process or as a means
of interpreting the past and its influence on the present. Though
he has abandoned fiction for a historical study, Durtal has little
respect for this discipline:

Pour Durtal, l'histoire était... le plus solennel des
mensonges, le plus enfantin des leurres. (I,31)

It is impossible to achieve any sort of scientific consensus regarding the interpretation of events; one can only try to do justice to one's subjective vision. Following this plea for idiosyncrasy, Huysmans somewhat mischievously places an attack on Joan of Arc in des Hermies's mouth (I,73-74). Far from being the saviour of France as is commonly supposed, she was actually responsible for the present false unification of the country, where Northerners, culturally and racially akin to the English, are forced to consider as their compatriots dusky, garlic-chewing Southerners who are really Italians or Spaniards. (This piece of mystification stung an angry retort from Maurras.) (106)

Since the 'visionary' aspect of history is so highly emphasised, it seems pointless to criticise the author's presentation of the Middle Ages for being one-sided. (107) If the nineteenth century's main achievement has been to degrade and falsify the values of the past (I,191) -- even manure is adulterated now (I,191) -- the Middle Ages is seen as a period of pure absolutes, where extremes of piety and brutality contrast with 'la bourgeoisie de l'âme' of modernity (I,188). Huysmans himself remarks that this past age tends to be seen in black and white (I,187), and seems prepared to use such language in turn, in describing Gilles de Rais's penitence, for instance:

Alors en sa blanche splendeur, l'âme du Moyen Age
rayonna dans cette salle. (II,141)

Just as Gilles de Rais is shown schematically, as a mystic adventurer in evil and good, at the expense of psychological or humanitarian considerations, so too Huysmans' version of the Middle Ages aims at promoting religious myth rather than historical fact. This is not necessarily a criticism: his

evocations of Tiffauges and Gilles de Rais's castle (chapter eight) show an impressive imaginative virtuosity. Huysmans' portrayal of the spirit of the late Middle Ages is certainly poetically appealing. (108) But as des Hermies says, the outlook of the people of this era was 'plus naïf et moins bête' (II,234) than that of their nineteenth-century contemporaries. The two periods are incompatible.

However bitter the denunciations of modernity (e.g. II,198), the characters are rooted in their society. Durtal's retreats at Carhaix's are temporary -- the bellringer is, moreover, recognised to be a social ana chronism (I,61). Though Durtal and des Hermies affect to scorn General Boulanger's election campaign (Huysmans curiously makes no reference to the political implications of Boulangisme, although his own department at the Sûreté apparently dealt with the surveillance of the General's activities), at the end of the book their discussion of Gilles de Rais's execution is interrupted, significantly enough, by the triumphant shouts of the supporters of the modern military man, drowning out the noble 'Prose des Trépassés' which accompanied Gilles to his death. In the last sentence of the novel, Durtal grossly reduces the modern soul to a faecal product: the children of this age

s'empliront les tripes et ils se vidangeront l'âme
par le bas-ventre! (II,235)

Spirit quite literally becomes faecal matter, in this final, highly 'naturalist', assertion of the hideous, but inescapable presence of the modern world, where the reconciliation aspired for in the notion of 'naturalisme spiritualiste' seems unattainable.

In the end then, the programme set out in the first chapter is seen more as an ideal than a practical reality in the remaining

twenty-one chapters. If the mystic transition which Durtal describes in Grünewald's crucifixion from the oppressive presence of tortured flesh to an absent, transcendent spirit is really only convincing as the gesture of a believer or would-be believer towards the Passion, so too in the rest of the book we have no real sense that the two 'paths' of the first chapter are fused. On the contrary, Huysmans seems to alternate inconclusively between, on the one hand, vehemently abusing his own age and contrasting it with a rather naive picture of 'mystery' in various forms, and, on the other, trying to recuperate mystery with the help of the pseudo-scientific approaches of his age. In an interesting article entitled 'La-bas: logique et signification du fantastique', (109) Marie-Louise Issaurat-Deslaef argues that this tension between rational and supernatural, the perplexity both Durtal and the reader feel as they are bombarded by a bizarre array of half-explained examples of mystery, allows one to define La-bas as a fantastic text. The sense of hesitation which characterises the fantastic 'constitue une tentative avortée d'accession à l'unité'; that is to say, for instance, that

Si le péché exerce une telle fascination sur Durtal c'est parce que même 'à rebours' et en quelque sorte négativement il offre l'image d'une intégration du désir au destin de l'être entier. (110)

Issaurat-Deslaef's conception of the fantastic seems to be derived (without acknowledgement) from Todorov's Introduction à la littérature fantastique, where the genre is said to depend on the creation of this feeling of uncertainty in the face of the supernatural. (111) Yet one feels that the fantastic emerges more by accident than design in La-bas. Huysmans is reaching

outside literature: his 'spiritualisme' is meant to be seen as an absolute, not an aesthetic device. 'Literature' alone is rejected in the opening chapter, or elsewhere seen only as a pis-aller:

la littérature n'a qu'une raison d'être, sauver celui
qui la fait du dégoût de vivre! (II,108)

And if the 'au-delà' proves to be unattainable, or appears merely as a sort of fin-de-siècle dilettantism, and once again the main character is left in suspension, having ironically lived out a 'petit roman' (II,207) of 'l'adultère, l'amour, l'ambition' (I,5) of the very variety he himself scorns, we are left with a sense of barely reconcilable contradictions. Whether Huysmans ever succeeds in reconciling the conflicting demands of literary creation and religious experience, the marvellous or fantastic seen as the product of a text and the supernatural seen as the manifestation of an absolute truth, will be discussed in the next chapter.

But at this point, what is first striking about La-bas -- its unusual richness in terms of action compared with Huysmans' other novels -- ultimately seems to remain its most successful quality. The accounts of Gilles de Rais's career, of Durtal's amorous intrigue and of his initiation into satanism in theory and practice, are interesting, entertaining, and skilfully integrated. However, the movement of ideas set off by this tripartite plot (112) does not attain a corresponding coherence. On investigation, the structure of the novel itself can be seen to fit into a rather schematic pattern. This is particularly true of the opening chapter, which, for instance, seems deliberately 'unreadable' in terms of character or incident (unlike the rest of the book): Huysmans blatantly uses his dialogue simply to

further a debate on naturalism. But many of the discussions at Carhaix's similarly reveal a rather clumsy adaptation of occult documentation to a fictional framework. One finds that certain gestures tend to be used throughout the novel to fill out these innumerable 'conversations' and cursorily assert the human, physical presence of the speakers. Lighting cigarettes, contemplating or poking the fire, or pregnant silences, for example, may accompany or interrupt exchanges or reveries, and create a 'thématique vide' -- a set of recurrent motifs whose function is purely mechanical. (113)

Occasionally, it is true, such details have some intrinsic value. When we see Durtal lighting his fire at the beginning of chapter six, this action falls into the account of his domestic arrangements, which always play a vital role in the lives of Huysmans' heroes: such homely tasks must be accomplished before the serious work of studying alchemy can begin. Open fires, besides, are given a certain nostalgic potency when des Hermies regrets that they are declining before the hideous, utilitarian stove (I,90).

One could argue, in a similar way, that the symbolism suggested by certain metaphors in the novel perhaps seems too explicitly schematic. Carhaix's retreat at Saint-Sulpice is deliberately elevated above the morass of modern mediocrity. He is first glimpsed in chapter three 'se balançant au-dessus du gouffre, les yeux au ciel' (I,49). (114) In an earlier version of this chapter, 'L'Accordant', published in Gil Blas on 18 January 1889, the narrator even discovers that beneath the tower Paris has vanished:

Arrivé au sommet de la tour, en plein air, je regardai Paris. Ainsi que je l'avais prévu, je ne voyais qu'un opaque brouillard, filigrané par des vermicelles d'eau.

In the novel itself, Durtal dreams of establishing 'un havre

tiède... là-haut' (I,58-59), immune from the waves of human stupidity breaking against the bottom of the towers. But in fact this polarisation of heights and depths is less simplistically one-sided: Durtal rejects the 'naivety' of this dream (I,59); the bellringer's sanctuary is actually extremely uncomfortable. Indeed it is 'une aérienne tombe' (I,65); Carhaix has the ghastly pallor of a man cut off from life (I,50). Not only is campanology a lost art but, at the end of the book, the flood of stupidity does finally break into the characters' nostalgic musings. Huysmans subverts the apparently categorical sense of his imagery; once again, the 'là-bas' is shown to have only the precarious existence of naive, idealising aspirations.

Perhaps because Huysmans appears to set forth a programme for revitalising naturalism at the beginning of La-bas, one is tempted to be too critical of the contradictory urges behind the ideas thrown up in the novel. For the first time, he appears to reject explicitly not simply a world, but the literary genre which observes and creates that world. While the retreats of A rebours and En rade are as it were spatial -- withdrawal to the 'thébaïde raffinée' or the country -- in La-bas the author's enterprise is also temporal and aesthetic. History is to be replaced by religious myth, a myth which art too must strive to encompass. But this project remains in the realm of the hypothetical; even while preaching the unity of matter and spirit (I,11) Huysmans recognises that they are separate and by his own terminology seems to perpetuate this separation. Consequently, La-bas repeats the circular movement of the preceding novels: far from stepping outside the world of naturalism, Huysmans tries to draw the 'au-delà' within it. The attempt remains in

suspension: we must turn to Huysmans' Catholic works proper to discover whether this paradoxical desire to recuperate the supernatural into what remains a highly naturalist vision of the world has any chance of success.

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CHAPTER SIX

HUYSMANS' RELIGIOUS WORKS: SYNTHESIS OR COMPROMISE?

La matière non spiritualisée fait peur à qui la contemple
attentivement.

(Ernest Hello)

Je piétine, je rabâche, mais, surtout, ce que je m'ennuie, ce que je m'ennuie. Je n'ai plus de goût ni pour le monde, ni pour le cloître, pour rien. Je vois en face ce couple ouvrier, jeune, bien portant et je les envie. Ils sont dans la norme, dans la vie, mariés et gais.

Mais moi! Toujours dehors. Le mariage? Mais, si l'affaire Eugénie a raté je n'y fus pour rien. Vécu en dehors de la littérature admise, hué comme naturaliste. Zka, venue au moment de la Trappe, mais il n'y avait rien de sérieux là! (...) Puis conversion, hors de toute littérature même naturaliste et plus hors encore des catholiques. C'est la solitude à jamais. Parler à qui? Les femmes: tout raté. La petite Anglaise pas compris. (...) Si je ne vais pas au cloître, j'aurai tout raté: vie de garçon, sans femme, mariage, - couvent.

(J.-K. Huysmans, June 1898)

Writers on Huysmans have frequently attempted to interpret his life as a positive progression. Pierre Cogny describes him 'à la recherche de l'unité'; Robert Baldick, whose chapter headings mark out the different roles the writer played during his existence, presents him in the final stages as a Christian mystic and martyr; while the Jesuit critic M.M. Belval unabashedly observes Huysmans moving 'des ténèbres à la lumière'. Even a critic like Bachelin who sees his subject in more purely literary terms, appears to suggest some kind of reconciliation in the transition 'du naturalisme littéraire au naturalisme mystique'. (1) But though it is true that Huysmans' religious writings brought him far more commercial success and notoriety than any of his earlier work, (2) it seems much less apparent that conversion brought him anything but additional problems in either his personal life or writing.

After Là-bas, Huysmans produced five substantial works: the trilogy of novels centred on the character Durtal (En route, 1895; La Cathédrale, 1898; L'Oblat, 1903); a biography of Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam, 1901; and Les Foules de Lourdes, 1906. One can only describe as astonishing the claim made by J. Roach that faith gave Huysmans 'serenity' in his last seventeen years. (3) The state of his emotional existence can be gauged from the diary entry of June 1898, quoted at the head of this chapter, or from his admission to Myriam Harry that he considered suicide on his return to Paris from Ligugé in 1902 (4): he had failed to form social or marital bonds, had failed to integrate into a religious community, had rejected the literary world. The character Durtal, at the end of En route and L'Oblat, is left similarly displaced, with the support only of his religious faith. And it is not wholly an exaggeration to say that Huysmans' brand of Catholicism might

well be seen as a rationalisation of his agonised view of the world: suffering, rather than joy or charity, is its main component and is made into the purpose of life. The physical and spiritual torments of Christ, the saints and man are a major theme of all five religious works.

Although the majority of the hundreds of books and articles devoted to Huysmans probably lay more stress on the work following La-bas than the work before it, (5) few commentators have tried to assess the literary qualities of his religious writing and decide in any seriousness how exactly naturalism might be transmuted into a 'naturalisme mystique'. The most extreme 'Catholic' critics simply dismiss or ignore the early work:

L'oeuvre entière de Huysmans n'est que le récit d'une âme, -- celle de l'auteur -- depuis les ténèbres du péché jusqu'à des hauteurs relativement élevées de sainteté. Nous l'avons vu, dans ses premiers romans, se vautrer dans la boue naturaliste... (6)

An opposing viewpoint allows for continuity, but in a somewhat crude and reductive fashion:

Naturaliste, il le fut toujours, même après sa conversion. Pour lui, tous les sujets se valaient et se traitaient sur le même plan de l'observation aiguë. Il entendait parler du sacrifice eucharistique comme d'une botte d'asperges. (7)

In his early novels, Huysmans begins by exploring some of the well-defined territories of naturalism (prostitution, urban squalor, working-class culture, sexual mores), and then proceeds to strike a more authentic, personal note in the works describing individuals who strive to reach beyond the limits of the naturalist world but are brought down by the forces which govern it (domestic and socio-economic necessity in En ménage and A vau-l'eau, heredity and the biological impulse in A rebours). After showing des Esseintes's failure to attack nature head-on in A rebours, Huysmans begins in En rade and La-bas to invent or discover a less

tautological method of circumventing nature by adding a 'vertical' perspective to the closed horizons of naturalism, intimating the existence of heaven and hell, an order above nature, the supernatural, which can subsume the natural. (8) But we are left with a pattern of oscillating, contradictory movements already familiar from the circular plots of the previous books. Marie-Louise Issaurat-Deslaef has argued that this ambivalence makes La-bas a fantastic text and thus in a sense a qualified success. (9) Nevertheless, Huysmans' personal uncertainty about religion is reflected in La-bas, and the synthesis proposed in 'le naturalisme spiritualiste' is not achieved.

By the time of En route, however, Huysmans has committed himself unequivocally to Catholicism. The main question this chapter will seek to answer is how far this commitment is reflected in his religious works: in other words, are the hesitations of La-bas finally resolved and a genuine synthesis created, a synthesis encapsulated in the password 'naturalisme spiritualiste'?

The similarities between La-bas and its successors are quite apparent. Where Gilles de Rais tries to attain an absolute of evil by inflicting fiendish tortures on others, in the religious works (and notably Sainte Lydwine) the sacrificial victim reaches an absolute of celestial bliss by voluntarily submitting to appalling physical torment. In each case, though the 'spiritual' outcome is reversed, corporeal suffering is described in harrowing sensual detail, and the surrounding atmosphere remains one of the macabre and fantastic. Other more obviously naturalist techniques are also retained. One thinks, for instance, of stylistic mannerisms such as that which involves linking the concrete and the abstract, or the material and the ethereal, in metaphors which

seem to aim at a blatant incongruity: thus if in En rade latrines are 'les confessionaux du corps' (p.91), in En route confession becomes a chance to 'se pouiller l'âme' (I,3). Monastic life is observed with sardonic accuracy in L'Oblat, while the portrait of Brother Simeon in En route is 'une photographie sans retouches... d'après la méthode naturaliste', according to the author's preface (I,xii). Documentation and description play as great a part as ever; Huysmans can rarely mention a church without giving a barrage of information about its history and architecture.

This chapter will examine some of the key themes of Huysmans' five major religious works in the hope of discovering whether the author is in fact able to reconcile literature and belief, or rather a certain form of writing, of creating literature, with Catholicism, whether he produces a coherent view of the world despite the apparent conflict between faith and artistic technique, between fiction and didacticism, between describing 'physiological' man in the modern world and presenting the supernatural as literally true and present. Since it will be argued that the purely fictional qualities of his religious works are rarely satisfying, it seems fruitful to look beyond the trilogy of novels and include Sainte Lydwine and Les Foules de Lourdes in the discussion. Five areas will be considered: firstly, Huysmans' attitude towards writing religious fiction, and secondly the particular case of En route. Three major themes of all five works will then be examined: the function of suffering (especially in Sainte Lydwine); the treatment of the marvellous and supernatural (particularly in Sainte Lydwine and Les Foules de Lourdes); the treatment of Christian symbolism (notably in La Cathédrale).

Naturalist authors rarely showed any great interest in the fictional, storytelling aspects of the novel. (10) Nearly a year before he began the definitive version of En route. (11) Huysmans wrote to Zola towards the end of June 1892 (a few days before his decisive first visit to La Trappe d'Igny, as it happens), congratulating him on La Débâcle, but adding:

Nous sommes rivés, tous, à une forme, au moule du roman - et je ne vois pas du tout le moyen d'en sortir. Et je me demande, en fermant La Débâcle, si le livre ne serait pas encore plus énorme et plus puissant s'il était dispensé d'une affabulation même légère... (12)

Huysmans in fact never fully resolves this dilemma. He retains the trappings or 'mould' of the novel through to La Cathédrale and L'Oblat more through habit than conviction. The mechanism of plot and character begins to seem almost derisively clumsy. As J.F. Franchet puts it,

Au fur et à mesure que l'on s'avance vers les derniers ouvrages de l'écrivain, la structure romanesque s'effrite, le personnage devient décor statique, d'où la psychologie est absente, pour se détruire comme personnage. D'un ouvrage à l'autre Durtal tend vers zéro. (13)

Nevertheless, the author ostensibly at least refuses such a fictional 'zero'; the mechanics are maintained, less from the desire for innovation expressed in La-bas than boredom, a certain pudeur (personal experience being shielded by a degree of fictional anonymity), and also some commercial cynicism.

The result is that with his last novel L'Oblat we have, to quote Baldick, 'une hydre littéraire à peine moins monstrueuse que La Cathédrale'. (14) Contemporary reviewers of this latter work were already puzzled why the author had tried to disguise a treatise on medieval symbolism and architecture as a novel. (15) Huysmans' own letters to the abbé Ferret reveal that he saw La Cathédrale as a condensation of a vast amount of religious

knowledge and history; there is no question of it being a novel. In a letter to Dom Besse he again describes the book as a dry, hybrid compendium (16); a few months earlier he had remarked:

ce n'est pas amusant du tout. - Dans quel enduit rouler ces pilules de symbolique pour les faire avaler sans dégoût par des gens qui ne se doutent même pas que tout dans l'église a un sens. (17)

He provides the answer himself in a letter to Charles Brun:

Je l'ai accommodé à la vague sauce de roman et ça a été un peu la couverture d'argent qui enlève l'aspect répugnant des pilules.

Durtal, au fond, n'est rien dans le livre, pas plus que ses pasteurs. Ils sont de simples pions dans ce jeu. (18)

The eccentric pieties of the housekeeper Mme Bavoil were intended to give the reader some light relief in La Cathédrale and L'Oblat. (19) 'Tout cela ne tient pas debout' she protests after a discourse on plants in La Cathédrale (II,49); 'jamais je n'aurais pensé que c'était si compliqué' she complains again (I,259) after Durtal has read out a twenty-page essay on the colour symbolism of Fra Angelico's Coronation of the Virgin. The reader too begins to suspect that far from providing a popularising synthesis of medieval art and symbolism, to compare with say Émile Mâle's excellent L'Art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France, published shortly after La Cathédrale, Huysmans in this book has lost control of his material and failed to fulfil the aims of either fiction or didacticism. One telling example might almost stand for the book as a whole, when towards the end, at the beginning of chapter fourteen, we see Durtal gloomily studying the symbolism of medieval bestiaries,

ahuri, devant ses livres et ses calepins, en quête d'un fil conducteur, perdu dans cet amas de textes contradictoires accumulés devant lui. (II,197)

Nevertheless, an interminable catalogue from these notebooks is then reeled off, typical of the dogged scrupulousness constantly

shown by the author whose bewilderingly detailed inventories cause R. Bessède to note

dans ce christianisme d'autodidacte un côté, dirait-on, bureaucratique. Il recense, il dresse des bilans, il a besoin d'avoir des pièces comptables. (20)

Given that both Huysmans and many critics are prepared to admit that La Cathédrale and L'Oblat are only very nominally novels, it would seem rather artificial to treat these works individually as pieces of fiction, while excluding Sainte Lydwine and Les Foules de Lourdes from consideration altogether. Besides one may well find Huysmans' attempt at hagiography in Sainte Lydwine rather more striking and original than his half-hearted efforts at fiction in his last two novels. In a similar way, by abandoning the uneasy mixture of fact and fiction for a more straightforward exercise in well-documented reportage, he produced a more readable book in Les Foules de Lourdes. It seems most useful, then, to centre the remainder of this discussion of the fictional aspects of his religious writings on En route -- 'ce livre qui tranche en deux ma vie'. (21)

Like La Cathédrale, En route was intended to be a didactic work. In letters to Dom Micheau, Huysmans says the book is not aimed at Catholics but 'le monde intellectuel de Paris'. In their sickness non-believers will find it a 'vomitif d'âme', a 'médecine de cheval'. (22) In other words, he addresses his public 'moins pour lui plaire que pour le convertir'. (23) In addition, however,

le livre est entièrement sincère. C'est une vraie confession d'âme, un essai de célébrer la splendeur des liturgies, l'art admirable de l'Église. (24)

This strong confessional element is what most obviously distinguishes En route from the other religious works. (25) Yet the book

is more than transposed autobiography. Sac au dos could after all be placed in this category. The difference between the two works is not simply that the first deals with a profane subject in a burlesque manner, while the later work treats the sacred completely seriously. In En route the author's confession is not simply recorded after the event but in a sense enacted through the process of writing. It is well known that Huysmans' conversion was in part brought about by his quest for new material for a book. On meeting his first spiritual director, the abbé Mugnier, in May 1891, he allegedly said:

Je vais publier en volume, un livre satanique, plein de messes noires. Je veux en faire un autre qui sera blanc. Mais il est nécessaire que je me blanchisse moi-même. Avez-vous du chlore pour mon âme? (26)

There could hardly be a more striking example of literature leading life, of the situation created according to the terms of the naturalist 'procès-verbal' or 'roman expérimental' setting in motion not merely the characters, but the author himself. (27)

Strictly speaking, these observations apply more to the initial version of En route discovered after the author's death and published in 1965, under the title La-haut, than to the finished novel. In this early draft, Durtal, who technically remains an unbeliever, admits:

Dieu n'est qu'un pis-aller, une voie qui m'intéresse justement parce que c'est celle que je connais le moins.
(La-haut, Casterman, Tournai, 1965, p.91)

The exploratory experiences of La-haut are abandoned once the author has definitely committed himself to the Church. (28)

While the prostitute Florence appears as a devilish sexual temptress in En route, her appeal is primarily to Durtal's imagination, since she is never presented in person. In La-haut,

however, far more space is proportionately devoted to this character and to 'La Bataille charnelle' (as Huysmans considered calling this draft), that ambivalent power of the flesh which is a peculiar preoccupation both of naturalism and a certain morbid religiosity. Her sexual perversions, though never described explicitly, constantly preoccupy Durtal, and she appears directly (e.g. p.132ff.), draining him with her sinister pleasures -- 'les pertes fluidiques avaient été immenses' (p.72) the author notes, referring it seems not to any physical loss of fluid but to a quasi-magical notion of sexual energy. This device of linking the psychological or physiological with 'supernatural' notions is frequently used in En route, as Huysmans moves away from the viewpoint that presents the human organism in terms of an internal system of equilibrium (the naturalist machine functioning according to 'appetite' or an interaction of mind and body) towards a pseudo-medieval nostalgia which sees the soul as the prey of external powers (Christ and Satan) and the body (especially in the case of Huysmans' suffering saints) as a tapestry on which the destiny of the Christian universe is woven. Thus if Durtal experiences an erotic dream in En route, the 'psychological' explanation of unconscious sexual desire is not even considered: he is said to be assailed by a 'forme fluidique' (En route, II,48), to be the prey of a succubus. Similarly, when tormented by religious scruples he is 'sous le coup d'une attaque démoniaque!' (II,117).

The indecisive voyage to La Salette which ends the fragment Là-haut becomes the crucial journey to La Trappe in the second part of En route, where Durtal accepts both the literal presence of the Devil and the spiritual authority of the Church by making his confession and taking the communion. This recovery of an

external sense of direction is perhaps reflected in the structure of En route. The first part, set in Paris, seems wilfully incoherent. 'Sans force pour réagir, il se regardait couler' (I,135), we are told of Durtal, who appears as a sort of screen on to which a flux of images is projected -- observations of religious ceremonies, reflections on religious art and belief, conversations and so on. The second part, on the other hand, follows a simple chronological pattern: each chapter recounts one day of Durtal's week-long stay at Notre-Dame de l'Atre, during which he begins to submit to the discipline of a religious community. This contrast may explain why Alphonse Daudet apparently considered 'les cent premières pages d'En Route de Huysmans mortelles, mais sa Trappe superbe'. (29)

The opening chapters of En route do suffer from a diffuseness to which the earlier novels are also prone. In chapter one, Durtal is said to 'rêvasser dans le vide' in Saint-Sulpice (I,30); in chapters two and three no real attempt is made to place him topographically (his armchair appears briefly as a prop, I,40) as he wanders aimlessly round Catholicism (I,67), interminably debating its issues with himself (I,67, I,72) as he tries to answer the question at the beginning of chapter two: 'Comment était-il redevenu catholique, comment en était-il arrivé là?' (I,31). This narrative incoherence can perhaps be justified as a vehicle for the character's physical and spiritual displacement: only when he gains his monk's cell in part two do we see the hero as much more than a fleeting spectator of religious ceremony and his own thoughts. Nevertheless, this refusal to impose a sequential narrative on the book runs the risk of creating a haphazard jumble.

In La Cathédrale, the opening chapter which begins with a magnificent evocation of dawn breaking in the cathedral seen as

a living, life-giving entity, is unnecessarily fragmented by a lengthy parenthesis on Durtal's voyage to La Salette. Here, in fact, one begins to suspect that the incoherence of the three religious novels is not due to the author's desire to ignore or dismiss the conventions of realist fiction as a modernist novel might, but on the contrary to the fact that he clumsily insists on retaining notions of character or setting when they have no valid function. Thus he is not content to describe 'les solennelles ténèbres de la forêt tiède' (La Cathédrale, I,9), but feels constrained to tell us that Durtal is the agent observing this spectacle, what progress he has been making recently, and so forth. One is certainly inclined to reject the fictional excrescences of La Cathédrale and L'Oblat in this way. Though Huysmans perhaps makes more effort to integrate fact into a fictional setting in the second novel -- transferring the monastery of Ligugé on which L'Oblat is based to Burgundy, for instance -- nevertheless, his gestures towards fiction tend to be derisory. One example verges on self-parody, as Durtal provides a 'psychological' explanation for the interminable catalogues of miscellaneous information which fill up the novel's pages by complaining:

Quel malheur tout de même que d'avoir une bobine dans la
cervelle et de se dévider ainsi ses récentes lectures!
(L'Oblat, I,181)

Elsewhere he regrets in similar fashion 'ma manie de soliloquer à bâtons rompus' (L'Oblat, I,285).

Huysmans thus occasionally appears to be underlining the very emptiness of such mechanisms, drawing attention to this 'thématique vide'. But this only makes clearer the contradiction in his attitude towards the structure of conventional fiction,

his refusal to give up invention even when the gratuitousness of what is invented becomes more and more apparent. The novels also reveal a rather more complicated sort of uncertainty which can perhaps be described by focusing on two of the main aspects of naturalism: firstly, the nature of man and his place in the world; secondly, the implicit assumption that language used as a plastic, tactile medium is adequate to express experience, even when experience is of an abstract rather than a material nature. Huysmans essentially moves between two extremes as far as both of these aspects are concerned: on the one hand, he may claim to reject rationalist notions of psychology, deny the power of language to express the ineffable, and in fact claim to stand outside the material world; and yet at the same time his own language and the underlying attitudes it suggests will tend to invalidate all these denials.

In La-haut Huysmans categorically rejects the psycho-physiological interpretation which reduces religious aspirations to nervous or physical disorders:

on ne guérit pas les faims de l'âme avec de l'hémoglobine et du fer; l'on ne s'éloigne pas l'être humain de l'église avec des douches. (p.78)

In theory at least he thus removes himself from the account of a conversion which one finds in the Goncourts' Madame Gervaisais (1869), where the onset of consumption and religious ecstasy are skilfully, if maliciously, interlinked. (30) En route again states explicitly that 'la psychologie de la conversion (est) nulle' (I,33). Later in the book the physiological view of man is even presented as a diabolic temptation, a wilful reduction of the spiritual, as a satanic voice whispers in Durtal's ear 'les mystiques sont des anémo-nerveux...' (II,185). Yet Huysmans

himself cannot help succumbing to this temptation, at least on the level of metaphor: conversion is compared to the process of digestion (I,32); mysticism is even compared with physiology (I,138), as a 'science absolument exacte' (I,137). What he separates with one hand, he joins with the other.

Conversion, in a sense, allows Huysmans to integrate the material world into a higher order. (31) But the acquisition of belief does not allow his hero to achieve integration within the material world. On the contrary, Huysmans puts forward a traditional mystical view which preaches abnegation of matter and the flesh and dissolution of the self into the divinity. (32) Thus in En route we have the abbé Gévresin's curiously obscene dismissal of sexual love:

Perdre son âme pour le plaisir de projeter un peu de boue hors de soi, car c'est cela votre amour humain! quelle démente! (I,120)

In the same novel, the elaborate description of a clothing ceremony in chapter eight of part one deliberately emphasises this dying to the world as the ideal of the religious experience, with its insistence on 'le suaire religieux' of the postulant (I,209), on the nuns who resemble 'une rangée de cadavres' (I,211).

Brother Simeón, the saintly swineherd of En route, provides another forceful example of such renunciation. His 'sancta simplicitas' may suggest involuntary comedy (when his spectacles get dirty he fears he is going blind) or a rather forced nostalgia for the Middle Ages and its marvels (he cures his pigs by sprinkling them with holy water), but nevertheless he represents a model of an isolation from the world far more impenetrable in its unthinking innocence than that of a des Esseintes. Yet for the sophisticated Durtal such a retreat remains an impossibility. We may read that

le bonheur consiste certainement à être interné dans un lieu très fermé, dans une prison bien close, où une chapelle est toujours ouverte... (II,167)

when such aspirations towards total claustration with an outlet directly to the spiritual remain purely utopian and nostalgic. (33) Durtal is left wondering 'où se réfugier?' at the end of En route (II,314), while L'Oblat goes on to demonstrate that far from being a social model as En route naively supposes (II,287), the monastery is the scene both of internal conflicts and of external political pressures. Durtal is finally forcibly brought back to the world.

Huysmans' language also oscillates between a renunciation of words and a fascination with material, sensual details which on the contrary indicates an inability to escape matter. Durtal's conversion has in fact been effected through his senses, according to the abbé Gévresin (En route, I,124). Even when he takes the communion, there is an insistence on the physical texture of the wafer, which sticks to the palate and has to be unrolled by the tongue before 'la déglutition d'un Dieu' can painfully take place. As Durtal reflects, 'c'était encore trop matériel!' (En route, II,128). When Huysmans comes to recount some of the more important supernatural experiences in En route, however, he may give up the attempt, stating that the ineffable is by definition inexpressible:

Ce fut inexprimable; - car rien ne peut rendre les anxiétés, les angoisses de cet état par lequel il faut avoir passé pour le comprendre. (II,191-92)

But generally he strives to elaborate on the view that Durtal is literally the battleground of God, the Devil and man (II,160). The result is that the self becomes an empty space, where feeling or thought gives way to the play of abstract notions given concrete form. As Durtal remarks, in a Baudelairean image,

Je suis comme la litière d'un cirque, piétiné par toutes
les douleurs qui sortent et rentrent à tour de rôle. (II,195)(34)

But the forces which assail Durtal have neither an allegorical nor a poetic appeal; they are presented with a reductive literalness. Doubt and scruples are the work of Satan, who appears in person ('le bourreau entra en scène', II,198); the soul and body are felt as separate, 'Très nettement, très clairement' (II,198). Yet in neither case is there any real attempt to explore such sensations beyond the very conventional use of 'mystical' imagery:

l'âme trembla tout entière, voulut fuir, tourbillonna ainsi
qu'un oiseau qui se cogne aux vitres. (II,198)

Finally, Huysmans is forced to conclude: 'ce fut inénarrable' (II,198).

What one sees in such confessional scenes in En route is a contradiction between the author's literal-mindedness and the essentially intangible nature of the experience he sets out to describe. (35) Ultimately he realises that he lacks the linguistic resources to convey such experiences directly and resorts to melodrama or appeals to the inexpressible. (36) As we shall see, Huysmans certainly seems more comfortable when he can present the supernatural, not as the direct experience of his autobiographical hero, but as a pastiche of medieval conceptions of the marvellous. To conclude these comments on En route, then, the ideal of 'naturalisme mystique' hardly seems to be realised. On the contrary, 'mystique' at its highest is said to escape analysis: the mystic and mysticism are outside the world defined by naturalism. Naturalist language with its emphasis on the material texture of objects, and naturalist psychology with its monistic conception of man are seen not as devices which might give the immaterial tangible metaphorical form, but as dangerous forces which simply explain away the religious

experience. And yet, as hostile critics observed, (37) Huysmans seems to have submitted all too readily to these dangers.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, certain critics value En route principally as an autobiographical statement. A rather nebulous notion of personal authenticity tends to conceal the shortcomings of Huysmans' enterprise. (38) Yet the enterprise itself, of combining in a fictional framework the drama of an individual conscience with a Christian exegesis of the universe, has been successfully undertaken by other novelists -- the most immediate example contemporary with Huysmans being Léon Bloy. (39) The two authors share a superficial similarity in the polemical virulence with which they express their dislike of most of humanity, but Huysmans' doggedly pedantic and aesthetic treatment of Catholicism (caustically dismissed by Bloy in a review of La Cathédrale and in his novel La Femme pauvre) (40) is replaced in Bloy by an apocalyptic fervour and a paranoiac verve verging on mania. (Both Conor Cruise O'Brien and Henriette Psichari note the 'vent de folie' in his work.) (41) Bloy's hero Marchenoir, we are told in La Femme pauvre, 'naturalisait l'Infini dans les conversations les plus ordinaires', (42) and this project is genuinely achieved in his two novels, where certain passages brilliantly combine the concrete and everyday with a universal symbolism. The most mundane episode or gesture in fact exemplifies an epic Christian drama, (43) whereas in Huysmans' religious novels the events of everyday life appear more and more as intrusive distractions, weak echoes of his earlier works. (44)

Bloy, of course, professed a loathing for naturalism, dismissing Zola's novel Lourdes (1894), for instance, with

characteristic scatological invective:

C'est un peu fort tout de même que ce bison soit admis à déposer son paquet de fiente sur une grande chose, qui nous a fait sauter les larmes aux yeux! (45)

Bloy may well ape the language of naturalism, and carry its preoccupation with bodily processes to caricatural extremes, but nevertheless the divide between a humanitarian writer like Zola, who denounces 'cette révoltante glorification de la souffrance' professed by Catholicism, (46) and Bloy, for whom 'Toute chose terrestre est ordonnée pour la Douleur', (47) must be stressed. This section will look in particular at the role of suffering in Huysmans' religious writings. Like Bloy, he adheres to an especially virulent, dolorist version of Catholicism, categorised by Richard Griffiths as a key part of the 'reactionary revolution', or as the 'violent mystique' by Joyce Lowrie. (48)

Huysmans writes in L'Oblat:

toute
Au fond, pour dire la vérité, la semaine peineuse était celle qui convenait le mieux à ses aspirations et à ses goûts; il ne voyait bien Notre Seigneur qu'en croix et la Vierge en larmes. La 'pieta' surgissait devant lui avant la crèche. (II,73) (49)

In Bloy's Le Désespéré, the heroine Véronique has all her teeth pulled out to prevent Marchennoir feeling desire for her. Huysmans describes a medieval saint who cauterised her genitals with burning coals with the hope of extirpating sexual longing; a similar operation is performed with sealing wax in Barbey d'Aurevilly's Les Diaboliques. Regarding such incidents, Lowrie remarks apologetically that in these authors

there is a certain indulgence in verbal violence that seems, almost, to be in complicity with violence. (50)

Some of the criticisms against which she tries to defend Barbey might equally be applied to Huysmans. She warns of the danger of dwelling disproportionately on the more lurid extravagances

of Barbey's work (51); for Barbey, Satan is not 'a literal and otherworldly monster' -- he 'is the perverse, evil, and sadistic within man'. Catholicism is a sensual religion, emphasising in the doctrine of the Incarnation the assumption of spirit as flesh, and so for Barbey:

Though his dramas are essentially spiritual dramas, they are located in the physical bodies of his heroes and heroines. (52)

Yet Lowrie's own summaries of the stories in Les Diaboliques suggest the absurdity of calling these sadistic exercises in decadence 'spiritual dramas'. Griffiths's assessment of Barbey's Catholicism as essentially a literary pose which adds zest to his penchant for the macabre seems less far-fetched. (53)

If Barbey d'Aurevilly's Catholicism is seen as one version of the Romantic Agony (while a recent critic remarks on 'cette cruauté voluptueuse de l'écriture' in Bloy's work) (54), is it fair to see Huysmans' literary manifestations of Christian faith in the same way? This is not to doubt his personal sincerity, perhaps, but nevertheless it indicates an uneasy ambiguity in his writing between intention and achievement. The most striking treatment in his five works of suffering, spirit and flesh, is Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam. For Hubert Juin this book

est un catalogue d'horreurs; et dont on dirait, s'il s'agissait d'un film d'épouvante, qu'elle suinte l'hémoglobine. Il y a là des supplices décrits avec une minutie maniaque! (55)

In 1895, René Doumic had already classified Huysmans among 'Les Décadents du christianisme', seeing Durtal as the des Esseintes of religion, and noting in En route

surtout l'appel exaspéré de la sensualité. C'est bien là en effet ce qui se cache au fond de ce prétendu mysticisme. (56)

Huysmans' spiritual impulses are dismissed as perverted sensuality.

'Perversion' of the natural is certainly an important motif in A rebours: the aesthetic enterprise is a rebellious attempt to escape the degenerative process of biology. Zola too sees society and nature in terms of degeneration and destruction (the débâcle, the heredity of the Rougon-Macquart family), but at the same time offers possibilities of regeneration on a mythic level (the ending of Germinal, the notion of war as purifying in La Débâcle). For Huysmans, it is religious belief which, theoretically at least, allows him to 'recuperate' the world which A rebours shows to be irremediably hostile. Objects are no longer simply caught up in a process of decay, devoid of any meaning except that which the artist gratuitously imposes on them, but become receptacles of the divine and everlasting. Huysmans' new 'science' of Christian symbolism allows him to discover that

sur cette terre tout est signe, tout est figure, que le visible ne vaut que par ce qu'il recouvre d'invisible...
(La Cathédrale, II, 281) (57)

It may well be that he has succumbed to the 'besoin du merveilleux', to 'la divine illusion', as Zola describes the religious impulse in Lourdes, (58) unable to sustain, like the characters in Zola's novel, 'l'héroïsme amer de la raison'. (59) But what Zola explains away (the humanitarian message and pseudo-scientific rationalism of Lourdes seem an inadequate remedy for the suffering and fervour which the book itself describes), Huysmans at least tries to explain.

Nevertheless, 'sensuality' remains a key term for the understanding of Huysmans' new explanation of the world. A comment by Remy de Gourmont is highly illuminating, since it indicates a possibility of grafting belief on to naturalism:

Le catholicisme est le christianisme paganisé. Religion à la fois mystique et sensuelle, il peut satisfaire, et

il a satisfait uniquement, pendant longtemps, les deux tendances primordiales et contradictoires de l'humanité, qui sont de vivre à la fois dans le fini et dans l'infini, ou, en termes plus acceptables, dans la sensation et dans l'intelligence. (60)

The components which Huysmans uses to harness the sensual to the spiritual are suffering and the doctrine of substitution or reversibility. It is worth quoting a definition of this notion, given the importance which Huysmans attributes to it:

il s'agit, pour les fidèles qui s'y consacrent, d'offrir à Dieu, à titre de 'satisfaction' ou de 'réparation', soit des prières spéciales, soit des souffrances physiques ou morales chrétiennement acceptées, ou même sollicitées, de manière à compenser ainsi dans une certaine mesure les offenses continuellement faites à la majesté divine par les pécheurs non repentis. (61)

Huysmans seems to have derived his conception of vicarious suffering largely from the ex-abbé Boullan whose view of this doctrine was peculiarly mechanical and nearer magic than mysticism. (62) The extreme literal-mindedness which Huysmans shows in applying this belief might also be due to Bloy's influence. For the latter, suffering compensates not only sin, but all pleasure. In La Femme pauvre, Marchenoir addresses a sinister epithalamium to the heroine Clothilde: one couple's happiness cannot be paid for by the agony of a world, he warns; on her wedding night, in an hour six thousand corpses will mount up under the marital bed:

Au moment même où vous bûlerez de volupté, des grabataires ou des suppliciés, dont il serait puéril d'entreprendre le dénombrement, hurleront, comme en enfer, sous la dent de vos péchés. (63)

Saint Lydwina of Schiedam is wedded to her bed of sorrows for thirty-eight years, during which she submits to 'l'amoureuse furie de l'Époux' (I,69). Her maladies are described with an almost pornographic relish. Macabre details, seen with the callousness of a surgeon, abound. To draw out the worms swarming

in a gangrenous wound, they are fed with 'des cataplasmes de froment frais, de miel, de graisse de chapon...' (I,77); slices of fresh apple also sooth her wounds (I,79); visited by every possible illness (except leprosy, as this would have made her a social outcast, II,74), her body has to be strapped on to the bed, or it would simply fall apart. If naturalism normally presents the gradual decay and decline of the organic, here a metaphor suggests that Lydwine is a sort of hot-house plant where the cycle is accelerated a thousandfold:

Lydwine, elle, avait été arrachée d'une terre inerte pour être transplantée dans le sol ardent de la mystique. (I,118)

The macabre aestheticism of Le Drageoir aux épices is retained (64) (where a flayed carcass became an object of beauty, now the saint's corpse gives off a perfume so strong that those who inhale it can go for two days and three nights without sleep or food, II,86), but as this example indicates, Huysmans has abandoned the vraisemblance which underpins the naturalist text. A possible definition of his 'naturalisme mystique' might in fact be this attempt to jettison many of the notions of 'verisimilitude' which hold together the realist novel (a rationalist view of psychological probability, coherent narrative structure) while keeping a language with a peculiarly materialist texture.

This helps explain the apparent paradox of Sainte Lydwine, where illness described with the precision of a medical textbook is meant to demonstrate supernatural, that is essentially intangible, laws. Her illnesses are themselves supernaturally caused, (65) and their function is, according to the author, to make her 'le paratonnerre de sa patrie' (I,214). The image is typical; Huysmans has a tendency to talk of the laws of mysticism as though they were the laws of physics, comparable not simply in

their validity or truth but also in their operation. (66) Yet the word 'lightning-conductor' suggests a certain ambiguity in this functioning: is she expiating for others' sins, or somehow receiving the divine chastisement which otherwise they would have suffered? Huysmans in fact takes his conception of 'substitution' to an extreme that seems nearer the ex-abbe Boullan's heretical views (Boullan held, for instance, that sinful behaviour could be 'substituted' from one person to another, a convenient excuse for debauchery) than Catholic orthodoxy. Thus he shows us Lydwine taking on another person's toothache, adding: 'sa pourriture engendrait la bonne santé pour les autres' (I,214-15). (67) Such grotesque examples give the impression that 'mysticism' is a kind of witchcraft, consisting, as Griffiths says, 'of the extraordinary and the external rather than the inner life'. (68)

Lydwine is of course celebrated as a victim, and her inner life is of little significance. But her passivity allows Huysmans to fulfil an aspiration which is usually frustrated in his books -- to retreat from the world and its horrors, to achieve an aesthetic or spiritual autonomy at an absolute level. She is spared the need to eat or sleep, and at moments is able to leave her 'prison charnelle' (I,199) to wander in spirit to Eden and Purgatory. She is, in a sense then, separated from her body, which becomes a crucible for this transmutation enacted through 'cette divine alchimie qu'est la Douleur' (II,126). Furthermore, despite her isolation, she is integrated into the Christian universe, playing a vital role in the history of her age. This history is evoked with lurid brilliance in the first chapter of the book, although Huysmans tends to prefer the sweeping statement and the bizarre detail to factual accuracy (confusing, for example, when he mentions

'Le pharisaïsme et la cupidité de la race anglaise' (I,8), Henry IV and Henry VI, and thus attributing the victory of the battle of Agincourt to Henry VI's successor, Edward IV). (69) His interpretation of events like the Schism of 1378 to 1417 also shows a strange conception of logical reasoning:

Dieu consent à démontrer l'origine divine de l'Eglise, par le désordre et l'infamie des siens; il n'est point, en effet, d'institution humaine qui eût pu résister à de tels chocs. (I,22)

The tendentiousness of this argument is obvious enough -- the breathtaking non-sequitur of the first clause (infamy proves divine origin) is followed by a conclusion which seems the exact opposite of the expected conclusion (that is, that such events show the all too human, fallible nature of the Church) -- but it is worth underlining because it typifies a contradiction frequent in the religious works, Huysmans' habit of presenting the improbable or unprovable under a guise of rationalistic objectivity. Such examples allow him to reach the conclusion of the first chapter of Sainte Lydwine:

Jamais, en effet, l'équilibre du monde ne fut plus près de se rompre; et il semble aussi que jamais Dieu ne fut plus attentif à surveiller la balance des vertus et des vices, et à entasser, quand le plateau des iniquités descendait, comme contrepoids, des tortures de saintes! (I,36-37)

As M.M. Belval argues, mystic substitution ultimately depends on belief in the immeasurable love and charity of God; there is consequently no question of maintaining an 'equilibrium'. (70) But for Huysmans, the invisible has to be made visible, divine laws have to be treated as physical laws. The metaphorical becomes the literal: vice and virtue are measured out on a set of scales like flour or sugar. Bloy, maliciously no doubt, reports Huysmans as saying 'Je voudrais un miracle naturaliste'. (71) and in Sainte Lydwine he strives to make the natural seem

miraculous. The opening chapter adds epidemics, famine and war to the manifestations of divine wrath; the end of the book adds the conflagration at the Bazar de la Charité in 1897 to the list (II,122-24). One is driven to conclude that Huysmans' theory of suffering is at best tautological (if war demonstrates man's impiety, can it also be a punishment? is it necessary to have the succession of expiatory saints through the ages, described in chapter fifteen, when natural disasters serve the same purpose?), at worst shows a naive credulity. (Lucien Descaves apparently remarked that for Huysmans, 'credo' meant 'je suis crédule'.) (72)

This naivety is to some extent deliberate, insofar as Sainte Lydwine is written under the sign of the marvellous. Though Huysmans offers only grudging praise of 'La Légende de saint Julien l'Hospitalier' in En route (I,39), his own exercise in hagiology is equally an attempt to re-create the atmosphere of medieval legend. But Huysmans rejects Flaubert's influence precisely because, in his view, 'Saint Julien' is merely a literary pastiche, successful only as literature. He himself, in other words, would certainly not see his own nostalgia for the Middle Ages simply as an artistic device. Nevertheless, certain aspects of Sainte Lydwine seem precisely to amount to an imitation of medieval attitudes which have no real validity in the nineteenth or twentieth century. For example, Émile Mâle points out that history for the thirteenth century consists not of events, but of the succession of the saints:

Les saints forment une chaîne céleste qui va de saint Louis aux apôtres, et qui, des apôtres, par les patriarches et les prophètes, remonte jusqu'à Abel, le premier des justes. (73)

Huysmans, of course, tries to carry his succession of expiatory

saints right up to modern times in Sainte Lydwine.

One of the most famous collections of lives of the saints is the thirteenth-century Golden Legend compiled by Voragine. The introduction by the R.P. H. Savon to a modern French translation of this work (74) allows us to draw some illuminating parallels with Huysmans. Though Voragine has a conception of vraisemblance remote from that of the modern reader, argues Savon, he sees himself as a historian, not a mythographer. His criteria for 'authenticity' are theological, not factual; at the same time he is aiming at a popular audience which likes 'les couleurs vives et les contrastes un peu criards'. (75) It was suggested above that Huysmans tries to apply the 'laws' of mysticism in a strangely concrete way, so that Lydwine becomes a 'lightning-conductor' literally rather than figuratively. Savon in fact makes much the same point about The Golden Legend:

Ce que l'on trouve souvent à la base des épisodes les plus extraordinaires -- on est tenté de dire les plus extravagants --, c'est en somme de la rhétorique que l'on a prise au mot, des métaphores qui se sont en quelque sorte solidifiées, matérialisées, des hyperboles interprétées au pied de la lettre. C'est de l'éloquence qui s'est faite histoire. (76)

And he adds:

Si (des) tableaux d'horreur abondent c'est que la grâce comme la vengeance de Dieu doivent devenir sensibles. La Légende dorée satisfait ainsi au matérialisme spontané de la foule. Le surnaturel s'y voit, s'y palpe; il n'existe pour ainsi dire jamais à part du merveilleux. (77)

Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam thus certainly captures some of the spirit and manner of popular medieval belief. But Savon suggests that this spirit may only amount to a 'charme candide et désuet' (78); far from being a vehicle for an intangible spiritual reality, 'le merveilleux semble trop souvent étouffer le surnaturel.' (79) This view was, it seems, prevalent in the seventeenth century -- and Huysmans significantly does attack 'Jansenists' who remove the

miracles from their hagiographical works (Sainte Lydwine, II, 93-94). But he himself is writing neither for an unsophisticated audience ready to take the marvellous at face value, nor even for a sophisticated audience interested in a pastiche of colourful superstitions. In his opinion, Sainte Lydwine stands or falls as a serious, didactic work on mysticism. His saint, he tells H. Allais

n'est intéressante que par les grandes théories mystiques qu'elle soulève, car sans cela, ce n'est qu'un tissu d'anecdotes et il n'y a pas de tremplin d'art... (80)

In this sense, the book with its tendentious interpretation of history and its simplistic theorising is hardly a success; few readers are likely to take the author's argument seriously. Huysmans' 'naturalisme mystique' could more appropriately be called a 'naturalisme merveilleux'.

When dealing with the supernatural in the framework of the novel which treats contemporary events, Huysmans is forced to resort to melodramatic schematisation or admit the inadequacy of his powers of expression; but when he abandons the conventions of fictional vraisemblance, giving the supernatural concrete form, it becomes a lurid pastiche of his medieval sources, with a macabre appeal, perhaps, but remote from the author's intentions. Examples taken from other works prove the same point: Huysmans in fact seems fascinated by the lurid, grotesque aspects of sanctity. A notorious episode occurs in chapter fourteen of La Cathédrale, during a discussion of 'l'osmologie mystique', when the abbé Gévresin recounts the history of sainte Christine de Stumbèle, pursued by the Devil from her childhood. Her torments take on not merely a concrete but a living form: her food changes into toads, snakes or spiders as she is about to eat it; Satan himself

appears as an enormous toad and nestles between her breasts; at last she plucks up her courage, slips her hand

entre sa poitrine et le ventre du crapaud, arrache violemment la bête et la jette sur le pavé.

Elle s'y écrasa, en résonnant, dit la sainte, ainsi qu'un vieux soulier. (La Cathédrale, II,222)

Huysmans cannot resist the final vivid appeal to the reader's ear of the beast splattering on the floor. But sound is followed by odours -- the 'farces stercoraires' (II,223) which befall the saint after Advent in 1268. Christine and her friends are now bombarded with dung -- the saint 'en demeure tout empâtée', while a Dominican friar is hit in the eye by 'un paquet de matière si dure qu'il s'écrie: "Malheur, me voici borgne!"' (II,223). The conclusion, however, attempts to justify these excremential, if entertaining details: a transformation occurs.

L'odeur, qui était d'une fétidité plus qu'humaine, s'est muée en une fleur angélique. (II,224)

And Gévresin adds that such cases have recurred even in modern times. Durtal, however, sees no symbolic significance in this account, and it is therefore left in the text without any interpretive commentary as a bizarre incident. The reader might conclude that it is simply an example of Huysmans' penchant for the grotesque, to be set against an earlier part of La Cathédrale, the magnificently satirical account in chapter eight of the Bishop's procession through Chartres. Such episodes enliven the dull catalogues which fill most of the book, it is true, (81) but seem gratuitous if meant to supply a religious message -- all we see of Christine's sanctity is her ability to remove the smell of dung. Apart from the fact that it demonstrates supernatural power -- as a sort of miraculous disinfectant -- the transmutation has no real spiritual significance. Yet Huysmans in fact saw religion precisely as a

disinfectant (as 'du chlore pour mon âme'), as a way of enhancing the foulness of matter, of transforming the body whose waste products are an immediate reflection of the cycle of decay in which the whole organism is trapped, into an agent performing the divine will through the putrescent humiliation of the flesh. Hence perhaps the statement of Jean-Luc Steinmetz that for Huysmans 'L'odeur de la sainteté n'est que la très étrange sublimation de celle de la merde...' (82).

Matter transformed through marvel is at the heart of Huysmans' religious vision. We hear too the proselytising tone (Catherine's adventures should not be dismissed as an invention of medieval superstition, for such incidents happen even today), but here there is an uncertainty; modern miracles have to contend with the demands of scientific verification. The problems this causes are shown in Les Foules de Lourdes. In theory of course Lourdes is an excellent subject for Huysmans' particular approach, for as James Webb says, those seeking to return to primal truths and to restore the miraculous to religious life will find that

Nowhere is this more true than in the sequence of apparitions of the Virgin; and of these Lourdes, with its cult of healing, is most of all concerned with the material signs. (83)

To some extent, Huysmans continues to look for material representations of the spiritual in Les Foules de Lourdes. The opening chapters contain meditations on fire and water which show how the elemental can be given religious meaning -- in the grotto, the fire of the candles symbolising the desires of the suffering, is answered by the healing water of the spring: 'Ce qu'on demande ici par le Feu, on l'obtient par l'Eau' (p.46). But generally Huysmans proceeds with a confused cautiousness.

The most striking aspect of Les Foules is undoubtedly the

description of disease. Huysmans lingers over the hideous flora produced by 'la loque décomposée de notre pauvre corps' (p.85) with a morbid fascination that combines genuine compassion, macabre comedy, and the sort of aesthetic interest in difformity that might be felt by a sculptor of gargoyles:

L'on se remémore les bêtes fabuleuses du Moyen Age, mais que sont-elles en comparaison de la tête de mort du loup qui saigne et de la langue tuméfiée qui précède le paysan de Coutances? (p.85)

It is difficult to convey the horror of some of these descriptions (should one want to do so) by quoting them out of context. It is worth remembering that Les Foules is written as a documentary report in the first person, set in the early years of the twentieth century. The remote, naive charm of the fourteenth or early fifteenth century is removed: we are given a direct experience of suffering as observed by the author; when he presents 'la tablee des monstres' in the hospital (p.72), these are people actually seen by himself, not the inventions of fiction or a remote past. The narrator's reflection that one is thankful to God to escape such illnesses (p.85) takes on a gruesome irony if one recalls the nature of the author's death in the year following the publication of the book -- Huysmans had as it were written his own obituary, as he himself grimly remarked. (84)

Les Foules de Lourdes is then as much an exploration of disease as of the miraculous -- disease presented with a deliberate nakedness. But Huysmans is much less prepared to interpret this suffering as part of a scheme of reparation or redemption than in the other religious works. Indeed, as he says, 'Lourdes a pris, en quelque sorte, le contre-pied de la Mystique' (p.154), since it represents a revolt against suffering, a despairing appeal to the Virgin:

Cette Grotte, elle est le hangar des âmes en transe du monde, le hangar où tous les écrasés de la vie viennent s'abriter et échouent en dernier ressort; elle est le refuge des existences condamnées, des tortures que rien n'allège; toute la souffrance de l'univers tient, condensée, en cet étroit espace. (p.44)

His attitude to miracles is also cautious, though here we see not a compassionate discretion before the enormity of human suffering, but a confused indecision. As Micheline Tison-Braun points out, there is a strange paradox in the resurgence of the supernatural in the mid-nineteenth century at the very moment when science appeared to have triumphed. (85) Lourdes, with its 'bureau de constatations' using the skills of medical science to 'prove' that the impossible has occurred, exemplifies this paradox. Rather as he did in En route, Huysmans oscillates between two attitudes -- one which rejects science outright, the other which tries to integrate it into a religious perspective -- without apparently recognising the contradiction.

At first he remains disdainful of notions of rational or empirical proof:

ma foi ne repose ni sur ma raison, ni sur les perceptions plus ou moins certaines de mes sens; elle relève d'un sentiment intérieur, d'une assurance acquise par des preuves internes... (pp.29-30)

He rejects 'ces câciques de la psychiâtrie' with their insistence on auto-suggestion (p.30), accusing Zola of bad faith in his treatment of miracles in Lourdes (86) and lamenting: 'Nous voulons raisonner et notre pauvre entendement est si borné!' (p.156).

He derides the pseudo-scientific rationalism of sceptics (e.g. pp.288-89), although his own conception of psychiatry seems equally superficial. He seems, for instance, to see auto-suggestion as a purely conscious, intellectual process, when he doubts that a young child can be the victim of this phenomenon.

Yet at the same time he is prepared to accept scientific evidence when it favours the miraculous. Thus an autopsy can 'prove' the miraculous cure of a broken leg bone, at a shrine in Belgium:

Cette autopsie d'un miracle est certainement la preuve la plus extraordinaire qui ait jamais pu être fournie d'une action surnaturelle remédiant à l'impuissance humaine dans les guérisons d'ici-bas. Les plaies nerveuses de Zola, l'autosuggestion, la foi qui guérit, toutes les vieilles fariboles des écoles de la Salpêtrière et de Nancy, sont réduites à rien, du coup. (p.299)

The facts themselves sound disputable -- the autopsy took place twenty years after the cure! -- but in any case, what we see here is a curious desire to beat the sceptics on their own ground, to make science 'prove' the irrational, when by definition one might assume the irrational is beyond proof of this sort.

Huysmans in fact confuses cause and effect, in much the same way as the positivists whom he himself has accused of this error. (87)

The autopsy demonstrates only that a cure took place: the cause remains unknown. Similarly, the function of the 'bureau de constatations', as the name suggests, is primarily to test the genuineness of the cure, to avoid fraudulent claims, but none the less, as Marina Warner says, it attempts 'the impossible task of reconciling the religious and scientific systems of thought'. (88)

In Les Foules de Lourdes Huysmans finally is unable to fit material signs into a comprehensible system of divine intervention. Neither faith nor rationalism can penetrate the mysteries of cures which seem totally arbitrary. When a child who has been cured has a relapse, the narrator asks in bewilderment:

comment expliquer l'ironie de ce faux miracle, le mensonge de cette validité factice? (p.209)

And he is driven to conclude:

La vérité est qu'il n'y a aucune règle, que la Vierge guérit qui, où et comme elle veut. (p.322)

All Huysmans' other religious works show a desire to systematise and synthesise, at the risk of combining elements which may prove incompatible. The novels try to unite didacticism, fiction and autobiography; La Cathédrale undertakes to explain the laws of Christian symbolism; Sainte Lydwine is a demonstration of the laws of mystic substitution and the transformation of matter through the marvellous. Les Foules, on the other hand, avoids the dogmatism and pedantry which tend to beset this approach; but one cannot help concluding that it also shows how inapplicable the author's conception of suffering or the marvellous is to the complicated reality of the twentieth century.

Can one say, then, that the central notion of Huysmans' religious works, of the spiritual being invested in the material through a 'naturalisme merveilleux', only amounts to a literary nostalgia for the beliefs of a past age? The Catholic writer Ernest Hello provides an illuminating definition of the fantastic and the marvellous:

Le fantastique est l'apparition sensible des relations cachées qui unissent le monde visible au monde invisible. Le merveilleux, tel qu'on l'entendait au dix-huitième siècle, ressemble au fantastique comme une machine ressemble à la vie. Le fantastique est puisé dans la nature même des choses; le merveilleux est une des ficelles dont les arts poétiques contiennent la recette. (89)

As it happens, this distinction is almost an exact reversal of one made by André Breton:

le fantastique est presque toujours de l'ordre de la fiction sans conséquence, alors que le merveilleux luit à l'extrême pointe du mouvement vital et engage l'affectivité tout entière. (90)

Whatever the terminology, however, both writers appear to agree that the fantastic/marvellous can range from being an empty literary device to being the medium which allows the ideal to

be integrated into the visible world, the individual as microcosm into a universal order. (91) The formalist approach taken by Todorov (who appears at one extreme to refuse to relate literature to the world at all) (92) might seem to be add odds with such views. Though he delineates themes of the 'I' based on the relations between man and the world, and themes of the 'you' based on relations between man and desire, the unconscious, (93) Todorov sees the fantastic primarily as a function of literary language, the creation of an ambiguity about the existence of the supernatural:

Le surnaturel naît du langage, il en est à la fois la conséquence et la preuve: non seulement le diable et les vampires n'existent que dans les mots, mais aussi seul le langage permet de concevoir ce qui est toujours absent: le surnaturel. Celui-ci devient donc un symbole du langage, au même titre que les figures de rhétorique... (94)

The literary text allows the real and unreal to be brought together, for in literature the 'real' merely depends on verbal convention.

Huysmans might have reacted unfavourably to the idea that the Virgin Mary was simply a rhetorical device (Todorov's highly formalist approach tends to exclude consideration of the literal truth of the fantastic, its relation to, say, religious experience), but nevertheless this argument can be combined quite effectively with Hello's as a way of pointing out the difference between Huysmans' intention and his actual achievement in his religious works. While he sees himself as a proponent of mysticism in an extra-literary sense, what we see is an author struggling to adapt his language to experience which escapes language, and therefore falling back on the most concrete aspects of religion (physical suffering, breaking of natural laws, architectural symbolism), to which he strives to give an exemplary demonstrative value, but which tend all too often

to collapse into rhetoric (tendentiousness, contradiction, the marvellous, dogmatism, mannerism), in other words, to function purely as 'literature'.

A final example, Huysmans' treatment of Christian symbolism, will show again how the attempt to order the world or history into an integrated demonstration of Christian myth is hardly successful. Although the idea of 'naturalisme mystique' perhaps implies a certain reductivism (Huysmans' most hostile critics in fact see his treatment of religion as a debasement of spiritual values), (95) the novels of Bloy do manage to fit belief into the frame of contemporary fiction. In a similar way, the act of interpreting the phenomena of the world as symbols of the divine runs the risk of reducing objects taken as examples to allegorical vehicles with little inherent interest. In the article 'Du genre fantastique' already cited, Hello offers a brief evocative indication of how such a trap might be avoided, with regard to the symbolism of precious stones. The order of beauty is at its highest in the mineral, he says, descending to the vegetable and again to the animal kingdom.

L'animal c'est la chair et le sang; le végétal représente les élans du monde créé vers l'infini, il fait à l'homme l'aumône de l'air respirable. Mais le minéral est le tabernacle même du feu et son séjour incorruptible; le feu, image de Dieu, resplendit en lui et se dégage par le choc. La pierre précieuse garde au fond d'elle sa splendeur; mais ce feu caché la rend dure, solide, incorruptible. (96)

The physical and metaphysical are skilfully interlinked; the natural order of things -- animate, organic, inorganic -- is made to reflect a higher order, but the relationship is reciprocal rather than arbitrarily imposed. The actual qualities of the three kingdoms suggest their place in a divine order: the animal

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perishes, at least in its corporeal form; the vegetable is harnessed to man's needs, but is also an intermediary for the infinite; the incorruptibility of the precious stone, its fire, suggests God ('image de Dieu'), or perhaps this 'feu caché' is the divine itself.

The magnificent opening pages of La Cathédrale suggest that following Hello, Huysmans has breathed a divine fire into the stones of the cathedral, as its mineral world is animated by the rising sun. As Sarrazin puts it, 'la pierre devient chair et lumière, s'humanise en restant surnaturelle'. (97) But this promise is short-lived. Huysmans boasts in the preface to A rebours that in his treatment of jewels in La Cathédrale (chapter seven) he has breathed fire into the mute stones of A rebours. Yet the verbal brilliance of his descriptions in A rebours is replaced by a dull list of jewels with the attributes which various authorities grant them -- attributes which have little or no intrinsic connection with the stones themselves, as Durtal himself admits (La Cathédrale, I, 260). Sarrazin bluntly calls this discussion 'cuisire et peu convaincante', (98) comparing it unfavourably with Claudel's essay on 'La Mystique des pierres précieuses'. Stating that

la pierre précieuse, ainsi qu'une âme lucide, est
lisible dans l'intégrité de sa substance, (99)

Claudel does indeed give a lengthy reading of the biblical symbolism of precious stones, but at the same time the substance of the jewels is lovingly evoked, with sensual detailing of their 'taste' or 'bouquet', and the enterprise is justified both as a scholarly and an imaginative exercise.

Fernande Zayed points out that the symbolism of Huysmans'

religious works has little connection with that of contemporary poets. Where they see it as a hermetic process of creation, suggestive mystery, suppression of naming ('Évoquer dans une ombre expresse, l'objet tu, par des mots allusifs, jamais directs...': Mallarmé) (100), he on the contrary undertakes to decipher, to make explicit the mystery of objects. In his own remarks on Mallarmé in A rebours, a quasi-mystical notion of a literature which is a self-sustaining distillation of experience inducing rapture is proposed. But in practice, Huysmans' Christian symbology depends heavily on the support of external authority. His approach seems to respect the principles of medieval symbolism, since the definition he offers in, for example, his essay 'La Symbolique de Notre-Dame de Paris' (101) corresponds closely to that given by Émile Mâle. For the Middle Ages, Mâle writes

Le monde est un livre immense, écrit de la main de Dieu, où chaque être est un mot plein de sens. (...) La science consiste donc non pas à étudier les choses en elles-mêmes, mais à pénétrer les enseignements que Dieu a mis pour nous en elles. (102)

The 'écriture sacrée' of Chartres cathedral makes it a microcosm. Its 'alphabet' of stone and glass (an alphabet which vanished with the printing press, as Victor Hugo points out in a famous chapter of Notre-Dame de Paris. 'Ceci tuera cela'), has to be described and deciphered.

The enterprise is then essentially derivative and interpretative rather than creative, and this is perhaps why, as its critics have observed, (103) La Cathédrale reads more like a theological treatise than a work of imagination. In addition, the results of this symbolic decoding are often disappointing. Far from doing justice to the monumental power and exuberance of the cathedral, they seem curiously banal and arbitrary. Thus the roof 'represents'

charity, the tiles soldiers warding off the pagan, the stones the union of souls or the throng of the faithful, the four walls the four Gospels or four Virtues, and so forth (I, 163-64). Far from investing the building with spiritual power, such monotonous allegorising tends to destroy the creative unity and force which the cathedral possesses in itself by subordinating these qualities to extrinsic, abstract conceptions.

It is well known that Marxist critics, and particularly Lukács, are hostile to naturalism because it seems to stand outside history, refusing to see a positive interaction between the individual and the social process and limiting itself to static description and biological fatalism. It was noted in chapter one that in a recent article on 'Lukács, Zola and the Aesthetics of Realism', B. Nelson has demonstrated the limitations of this view, arguing that Zola's descriptions in La Curée, for example, are not purely decorative but serve a dynamic purpose as political (albeit negative) statements. (104) The discussion of A rebours also showed how Huysmans' novel, whatever its appearance of aesthetic solipsism, actually reveals the social process to be inescapable (des Esseintes rejects certain social norms, but not others; his retreat from society is itself socially conditioned, insofar as he is a member of a moribund social class). But nevertheless, it seems a reasonable generalisation to say that naturalism offers a highly pessimistic view of the place of the individual in the world, and 'political' action in the world (be it des Esseintes's heroic withdrawal or the miners' strike) offers no effective remedy. One of the great benefits of religious belief for Huysmans is that it enables him to restore man to his place in history as an active agent. Suffering is no longer

gratuitous, part of a meaningless cycle of degeneration: it can be reclaimed, given a positive function in the workings of destiny, in which the individual is an active agent. And the artist is integrated into society, for it is he who symbolically explains the ways of God to man.

The cathedral, creation of the medieval artist or artisan, explains and represents the Creation in its entirety:

grâce à la science du symbolisme on a pu faire d'un monceau de pierres un macrocosme. (La Cathédrale, I,156)

We see all 'l'histoire du genre humain' (I,156), moral and material, from Adam to the Last Judgement, revealed in the cathedral. But 'history' in this sense no longer corresponds to temporal reality as it appears either to the reader or, for that matter, in Huysmans' religious works. Just as the schematic interpretation of suffering and nostalgic imitations of the marvels of medieval legend collapse when the author is confronted with the chaotic agony of contemporary Lourdes, so too this symbolic version of history is revealed as a reactionary harking-back to Christian myth which has no place in the modern world of political action. Political events drive Durtal from the monastery at the end of L'Oblat, when following the laws on the congregations the monks choose to leave France. As he remarks,

comment se désintéresser d'événements qui vont peut-être modifier, une fois de plus, ma vie? (L'Oblat, II,165)

But Huysmans' analysis of the causes of these events is in fact embarrassingly naive. The Dreyfus Affair reveals the work of the Devil; it is a conspiracy set up by the Freemasons, Protestants and Jews to destroy the Church (II,55-56). Meantime the Papacy under Leo XIII is both morally and politically impotent (II,60).

In conclusion, then, Huysmans' religious symbolism fails to carry conviction either in imaginative terms or as a means of ordering the world. His descriptions tend to degenerate into bewildering enumerations of the views of external authorities. This preference for outside sources reveals a certain pedantry and tendentiousness (Huysmans is fond of 'proving' a dubious point by quoting a long list of experts) (105), but also perhaps a desire to surrender his artistic autonomy, akin to the authoritarianism which Tison-Braun discerns in the conversions of Bourget and Brunetière, for whom

la nostalgie avouée de la foi recouvrait et dissimulait une nostalgie secrète de la loi. (106)

Though Huysmans might not share their social absolutism, his nostalgia for the Middle Ages suggests a desire for an age of metaphysical, social and artistic certainties, which as Tison-Braun indicates is typical of the authors of the Catholic revival:

A l'origine de tous les retours, on perçoit la volonté que le lien social soit placé sous le signe du sacré, et que la loi et les principes échappent au contrôle de la raison individuelle. (...) la véritable division idéologique s'établit entre les défenseurs, traditionalistes ou individualistes, du libre-arbitre, et les serviteurs, anarchistes ou autoritaires, des forces irrationnelles. (107)

In his personal life Huysmans was in fact reluctant to surrender his literary independence to ecclesiastical authority. His position as a writer of Catholic works caused him embarrassment at the Ministry, until his retirement in 1898; but at the same time his books, with their anti-clericalism and naturalist language, caused controversy in Catholic circles. En route and La Cathédrale came close to being placed on the Index (108); the author was denounced in separate brochures written by the abbés Belleville and Périès in 1898 (109); L'Oblat was greeted with disfavour by the Benedictines. Though he refused to

'renounce' his pre-conversion works, Huysmans' unsuccessful ambition of setting up a colony of artists who would live on the fringe of a religious community and his own oblation at Ligugé, where he did just that, show an attempt to compromise between the demands of art (requiring personal freedom of expression) and faith (submitting to external authority).

In La Femme pauvre, Bloy states that art is subservient to the Church or even foreign to its essence, as a useful preliminary to a vituperative (though accurate) jibe at Huysmans' aestheticism. (110) It is true that at the beginning of En route, Durtal exclaims

Ah! la vraie preuve du Catholicisme, c'était cet art qu'il avait fondé, cet art que nul n'a surpassé encore! (I,10)

and throughout the book has a tendency to grade religious services rather like concert performances (as Bloy sardonically noted). But ultimately Huysmans is prepared to admit that religion exceeds art -- in the passages in En route itself which appeal to the inexpressible, already discussed, or elsewhere; for example in Trois primitifs, when he withdraws as critic from discussing a Virgin by the Maître de Flémalle, pleading that

La critique d'art n'a presque plus rien à voir avec elle; la Vierge relève surtout du domaine de la liturgie et de la mystique. (p.340) (111)

Compromise thus seems equally applicable to his works as his life after the conversion. We do not see the erection of a unified system, but rather the attempt to group together elements which have no apparent cohesion.

It has been argued throughout that for Huysmans naturalism consists of a vision of the world preoccupied by the decay of

physical substance, and of a way of writing which aims especially to render the texture of this substance, writing for which the sensual, impressionistic and physiological are more important than the abstract or intellectual. The pre-conversion works attempt to escape the pessimistic implications of this vision through aestheticism: matter is made the material of art. But des Esseintes's failure reveals that the creative enterprise is neither self-justifying nor self-regulating. Conversion allows Huysmans to subordinate art to didacticism or autodidacticism (he is both proselyte and proselytiser) -- art serves to illustrate the absolute truths of Catholicism. Huysmans' discovery of symbology and the miraculous also allows him to validate the world of matter, (112) without fundamentally changing his presentation of it: degeneration in this world signals regeneration in the next. Like Zola, he turns to utopian mythologising, even if the myths he erects are rather different.

But Huysmans' Christian mythology turns out to be a fragmented, extraneous structure. (113) Far from achieving a synthesis of Christian belief and naturalism, he manages at best an episodic success. Symbolism allows him to display his descriptive skills, but its universalising aims prove to be merely a pedantic reciting of sources; his preoccupation with the marvellous allows him to recapture the lurid charm of medieval legend, but the result, despite its literary appeal, is nearer the oneiric exoticism of the dreams in En rade (as the reverie on Khosroës, king of Persia and purloiner of the true Cross, in chapter two of L'Oblat shows) (114) than an affirmation of spiritual values; certain autobiographical passages in the novels are genuinely moving, but generally Huysmans rejects

psychological investigation. His own judgements in his correspondence on his religious works nearly always reveal a sense of dissatisfaction at having to fit recalcitrant material into a literary framework. While Bloy's works show a single-minded fanaticism, Huysmans' religious works convey a feeling of hesitation and circularity, either in their plots, when they are novels, or in the general narrative tone and approach. The author's indecision about whether to reject science or somehow to subordinate it to the miraculous in Les Foules de Lourdes exemplifies the repetitiveness and uncertainty that characterise the books as a whole, where interminable rambling monologues trail off inconclusively with the phrase 'Et puis... et puis' (a phrase repeated almost obsessively), only to be taken up a little later. Whatever the sincerity of Huysmans' aspirations, in purely literary terms his religious works remain unsatisfying hybrids.

* * * * *

CONCLUSION

In a recent book on Huysmans' Catholic work, Madeleine Ortoleva has chosen to call him a 'romancier du salut'. (1) But it seems more defensible to argue that, contrary to this view, he is a fundamentally pessimistic author whose works display a strange combination of an appealing literary zest and a melancholy celebration of the position of rupture and discontinuity in which man exists in his fallen state. (Valéry's scintillating biographical memoir of Huysmans captures his tone perfectly.) (2) The individual is always cut off from objects in the outer world, from others, but also from his own inner world, betrayed by the impulses of the body or unconscious mind; and finally, far from achieving a reconciliation, Huysmans finds that literature too is deprived of value, becoming an author practising an art in which he has less and less faith. The tension between naturalism and some form of religious belief seems to be most fruitful when Huysmans has opted for neither but oscillates between the two (A rebours, La-bas): the choice of Catholicism ultimately destroys the fictional autonomy of his works (La Cathédrale, L'Oblat).

To talk of Huysmans 'opting' for naturalism or religion in his literary work is of course something of a simplification. If Huysmans is a naturalist, it is not simply because he was affiliated for a time to a particular literary group, but because his writing exhibits certain themes and techniques, a certain manner or vision which ultimately goes beyond the author's conscious control, whatever the changes in his personal outlook. Significantly, he continues to write novels which struggle to follow the realist conventions of character and setting right

up to the end of his career, even though he is himself aware that his material is barely fitted to what he sees more and more as the straitjacket of fiction. Huysmans may well finally be a novelist or naturalist despite himself; certainly there seems to be a fatal rift between matter and manner in the last two novels.

It is helpful to emphasise that Huysmans seems unable to avoid perceiving and expressing the world through a naturalist aesthetic grille, even when his ideology has become avowedly anti-naturalist, if one is to avoid the apparently awkward contradiction of claiming that Huysmans is really a naturalist even when he stands outside naturalism. The boundaries of naturalism itself in a wider sense can be hard to define: features that seem 'typically' naturalist have an unfortunate tendency to appear in the works of authors rarely associated with naturalism. Thus one finds a 'physiological' definition of remorse curiously akin to that of Zola in the preface to Thérèse Raquin in Péladan's novel Le Vice suprême (1884), where realist notions of vraisemblance usually play little part (in one scene the hero Mérodack dispatches an adversary by casting a spell on him). (3) Similarly, the comparisons of the onset of sexual desire to sap rising, or of the workings of the mind to a mechanism or clockwork, which are a rather hackneyed feature of some naturalist writing, can equally be found in a novel such as Victor Cherbuliez's Le Comte Kostia (1863). (4) This problem can perhaps be surmounted if one accepts that a term like naturalism is in itself essentially abstract: it is, as it were, a 'langue' which is illustrated and exemplified, to a greater or lesser degree, by the 'parole' of particular authors. Any given author in his writing may to some extent echo, define, or redefine

the 'language' of naturalism; rigid definitions may be unnecessarily restrictive. (5)

From the beginning, Huysmans' own attitude towards the literary resources of naturalism betrays some uncertainty. His preference for the term 'intimisme', which he applies to En ménage, anticipates the solipsistic tendencies of A rebours (though an earlier work like Sac au dos already reveals the desire to retreat to a safe interior -- the hospital ward where one shelters from the theatre of war). In his essay on 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir', he passes over Zola's scientism, with its political implications. The truths which Zola's works point to reside in their innovatory force in an artistic sense, he claims, but he is reluctant to recognise that they may be disturbing in a wider way (rejecting traditional psychology, breaking sexual and linguistic taboos, exposing social inequity, for example). Huysmans works himself into an unsatisfying contradictory position: defending Zola precisely because he is a controversial figure, yet denying rather than exploring the source of this controversy when he presents Zola as a typically bourgeois, comfortable author; trying to define naturalism, but ignoring its 'ideological' aspects. Huysmans' subsequent attempts to define naturalism again reveal a degree of theoretical naivety. The realist author or painter tends to be seen merely as a rebel against fixed convention; his own conventions are rarely studied.

Huysmans' first two published novels again show that in practical terms, he experiences difficulty in creating a convincing personal vision from the expressive resources of naturalism. Though these two books encapsulate many of the commonplaces of naturalist writing (urban squalor, vitiated

heredity, popular speech, descriptive setpieces, breaking of taboos, refusal of event) and in this sense are typical models (even if other authors such as Bonnetain, Hennique, Adam or Céard all go to farther extremes in various respects), as novels they are barely successful. Marthe suffers from a structural incoherence and uneasy juxtaposition of different tones.

Les Soeurs Vataud contains some magnificent setpieces, brilliantly observed, but as a whole again fails to provide a unified perspective: the author seems ill at ease with his popular characters, who often appear in a gratuitously debased light; the static nature of the plot may affirm the pessimistic point that for 'la plupart des êtres' life is a 'coulage terne et médiocre', as Huysmans gloomily observed elsewhere, (6) but it makes for dreary reading. The third novel, En ménage, partially surmounts these problems by focusing on a strongly drawn central character, with whom the author clearly feels some emotional affinity, but it is the story A vau-l'eau which is the most striking example of Huysmans' vision of the naturalist universe. Here the hapless protagonist is the prey both of the elements of the external world and his own physical and emotional impulses. In a fashion which is stylistically impressive and grimly humorous, Huysmans elaborates a metaphorical network centred on the quest for food and suggests the failure of appetite and desire in all areas of experience. Finally, the reader feels that the pessimism of the story is counteracted only by its literary virtuosity; Huysmans seems to have exhausted the subject matter of the naturalist 'procès-verbal'.

The solipsistic venture of A rebours is thus anticipated by this story: in A vau-l'eau. Huysmans' caricatural presentation

of the inadequacies of the contemporary world makes it futile for him to continue to describe this world. (Sac au dos has previously offered a derisory solution in the retreat to the hospital ward or even the latrine, while En ménage proposes the numbing shelter of 'la bêtise'.) A move towards the interior, an intimisme, is perhaps what reflects Huysmans' most personal contribution to naturalism in his early works -- his constant depiction of the perils of the domestic economy, his analysis of certain related areas of consciousness such as the 'crise juponnière'. But at the same time, one could argue that it is precisely this tendency which leads to the revolt expressed by A rebours. Ultimately, however, whatever the praise of art and artifice or individual eccentricity, A rebours itself remains firmly rooted in the naturalist vision. Des Esseintes's project fails -- he is defeated by the uncontrollable forces of the body (forces seen in terms of a determinist heredity) and ordered to restore himself to society if he is to survive. And throughout, his acts of rebellion against nature implicitly accept that nature is the arbiter of existence. Huysmans too proves to be reluctant to accept a brand of literature which claims to provide its own source of value (at the end, des Esseintes turns nostalgically not to art, but religious faith, his reveries on Mallarmé having been purely utopian). Unlike those critics who see in A rebours the triumph of form over content, of the imaginary over the real, Huysmans shows by des Esseintes's failure that the very aestheticism which he celebrates by writing against naturalism is as inadequate as the mimetic materialism of naturalism. (7)

If A rebours condemns naturalism, then, it also refuses to move towards symbolism, or rather any perspective which finds

its absolute, not in the material world, but in the artist's sacred transmutation in the act of creation (the sort of view expressed, for example, in Mallarmé's statement 'Nous ne sommes que de vaines formes de la matière, mais bien sublimes pour avoir inventé Dieu et notre âme'). (8) At first sight the next novel, En rade, appears to revert to a stock subject of naturalism -- the peasant novel. But the fantastic elements of this novel soon show that the author is striving to add a new dimension, to go beyond the commonplaces of naturalism. Here this new element, the 'là-bas', may at first seem to be the world of dreams. However, a more satisfactory interpretation of En rade is gained if one sees not simply a clumsy polarisation between dreams (the fantastic) and peasant life (naturalism) but rather an alternation throughout the book between the presentation of surfaces and the probing beneath these surfaces for some new source of value. Both the world of the château de Lourps and of Jacques's dreams are depicted with great descriptive verve and macabre humour; but both induce anguish in the hero. The probing of depths only adds to this anguish in its negative results: the dreams in fact can be seen to provide a grim commentary on the events of everyday life. The moon has been frozen into paralysis, and Jacques's wife is apparently a victim of the same process. The world of nature, on the other hand, is nauseating and corrupt -- the cynical brutalities of the farmyard are set against the spectacle of violation and prostitution of the first and third dreams.

Like the heroes des Esseintes and Jacques Marles, who are forced out of their unsuccessful havens and return to the world, Huysmans' exploratory ventures beyond naturalism take

him full circle. The expansionist programme announced in the opening chapter of La-bas is in a sense already undertaken in En rade; but the cosmic vision of the moon or the occult overtones of the nightmares merely seem to reaffirm on a wider scale the nihilistic message of A vau-l'eau that inner and outer worlds are bound to a natural order of decline and degeneration. In La-bas, the muted nostalgia expressed in A rebours and En rade for a supernatural dimension which might redeem the cycle of decay, is now made explicit. But again, in the long term, there is no reconciliation. Whatever his idealistic yearnings, Durtal is finally left with a sordid, adulterous love affair, and his reveries about the Middle Ages, where the absolute supposedly takes concrete form in a frenzy of evil and piety, are dispelled by the down-to-earth reality of General Boulanger's election victories. Far from uniting flesh and spirit, Durtal in fact seems to loathe his physical being, while remaining chained to material substance. Not only can 'love' only be sought by his gruesome copulation with Mme Chantelouve, but also the presence of the spiritual generally can only be demonstrated by a series of highly sensual tableaux -- the appalling atrocities of Gilles de Rais, the harrowing torments of Grünewald's Christ, the perverted eroticism of the Black Mass. Such frenzied, lurid images make La-bas a memorable and impressive book -- the spiritual, however, exists only as a sort of aching, nostalgic absence behind such visions.

Huysmans' whole notion of 'naturalisme spiritualiste' seems highly questionable. One cannot help feeling that bringing together two opposing terms (one suggesting rationalism and positivism, the other acceptance of religious faith) (9) reflects

an awkward compromise between opposing tendencies in the author more than anything else. In La-bas, he reveals a curious pseudo-rationalism: a desire to 'document' the supernatural, to find a 'scientific' explanation for magical events. In the religious works he frequently asserts that mysticism is a 'science'. Unsurprisingly, hostile Catholic critics accused him of trying to reduce Christianity to a debased materialist level. Huysmans does indeed remain a positivist insofar as he constantly seeks the support of tangible facts and external authority to document and substantiate his religious writings. But on investigation, his facts seem too often to be dubious, his authorities tendentious: the universalising aspirations of Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam or La Cathédrale are unsuccessful. In the first book, he mistakes a lurid and macabre display of medieval Christian legend for actual historical truth; in the second book, the symbolical splendour of Chartres cathedral degenerates into a monotonous, allegorising account of secondary sources. The spiritual dimension is again seen from a peculiarly sensual perspective: consequently, one is left with a vision of the marvellous which is garishly effective, perhaps, but falls short of the author's ambitious enterprise of evoking the truth of supernatural experience. At times, in fact, in an autobiographical novel like En route, he is driven to admit the inadequacy of language -- or his language -- to suggest the impact of religious experience.

The problem with the conception of 'naturalisme spiritualiste' seems to be due to the fact that the addition of the adjective 'spiritualiste' does not lead to an art which throws open the doors of the spiritual while remaining in touch with ordinary reality, but to the reduction of art to a secondary role.

Huysmans no longer sees literature as a possible source of value in itself, but rather struggles to subordinate the techniques of naturalism which remain an integral part of his practice as a writer to other purposes, to autobiography or didacticism. Just as his own position towards the Church as a writer was one of compromise -- living on the fringes of a religious community as an oblate, but refusing to 'renounce' his early work and delighting in anti-clericalism -- so too the last novels reflect a reluctance to abandon the conventions of naturalist fiction, even when both author and reader are soon made aware that his material, however moving and interesting it may be, is barely suitable for any form of fictional treatment.

Nevertheless, Huysmans' great achievement in his best works is undoubtedly that he takes naturalism and gives it a dimension which is peculiarly his own. Attempting to pin down this dimension, Marie-Claire Bancquart decides that Huysmans is a 'Surréaliste, oui, ou plutôt supranaturaliste'. (10)

Interestingly enough, the novelist Michel Tournier has dubbed himself a descendant of Huysmans' mode of naturalism. (11)

Whatever their differences, both authors evoke the texture of the real world with a sensual lushness that goes beyond mere photographic transcription. While Tournier justifies details such as a slightly sickening description of serpentine coils of excrement or the sweetness of Turkish delight by absorbing them into a baroque network of symbols of an impressive, though tortuous, intricacy, Huysmans too submits the objects and events of the world to a sinister, but magical enhancement. A visit to a restaurant, the barber's, the dentist's, a night in a railway carriage, become a bizarre odyssey. A rebours

succeeds triumphantly not because Huysmans abandons the real, but because the minutiae which make up the substance of the realist novel are tellingly harnessed to the service of the imaginary. Des Esseintes can revel in his fictitious voyage to London because Huysmans is in full command of the descriptive resources of naturalism which evoke for us the fiction of the Paris in which his hero moves, and because, more important perhaps, even in A rebours Huysmans maintains the vital mimetic illusion of naturalism: it is des Esseintes who is subverted, not the world of heredity and social pressures from which he strives in vain to escape, not the text which so brilliantly creates the illusion of this world.

NOTES

The following abbreviations are used in the notes and bibliography:

<u>BSH</u>	<u>Bulletin de la Société J.-K. Huysmans</u>
<u>CTSJ</u>	<u>Cahiers de la Tour Saint-Jacques</u>
<u>RDDM</u>	<u>Revue des deux mondes</u>
<u>RHLF</u>	<u>Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France</u>
<u>RSH</u>	<u>Revue des sciences humaines</u>

Works in English are published in London and works in French are published in Paris, unless otherwise stated.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. M. Issacharoff, op. cit., p.11.
2. R. Baldick, The Life of J.-K. Huysmans, 1955. Subsequent references are to the updated French translation published in 1958.
3. Mélanges Pierre Lambert consacrés à Huysmans, 1975.
4. See Marthe, Les Soeurs Vatar, En ménage. A vau-l'eau. A rebours. Le Drageoir aux épices. En rade. Un dilemme. Croquis parisiens. L'Art moderne and Certains, all published by the Union Générale d'Editions (10/18) in 1975, with prefaces by Hubert Juin.
A rebours, presented by Marc Fumaroli, Gallimard (Folio), 1977.
A rebours, introduction by Pierre Waldner, Garnier-Flammarion, 1978.
A rebours, edited by Rose Fortassier, Imprimerie Nationale, 1981.
La-bas, introduction by Pierre Cogny, Garnier-Flammarion, 1978.
5. D.Phil. thesis, 3 vols., Queen's College, Oxford, 1953.
6. Ibid., abstract, I,iii.
7. Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1970.
8. This Catholic bias still exists in certain cases. Thus Madeleine Y. Ortoleva observes in Joris-Karl Huysmans romancier du salut (Sherbrooke, 1981): 'Huysmans, sur le chemin de la guérison avec A rebours, eut de nombreuses rechutes. En rade, publié trois ans après, en fut une' (p.59).
9. J. Roach, op. cit., pp.85-86.
10. M.-C. Bancquart, Images littéraires du Paris 'fin-de-siècle', 1979, p.158.
11. 'L'oeuvre entière de Huysmans n'est que le récit de la montée d'une âme, -- celle de l'auteur --, depuis les ténèbres du péché jusqu'à des hauteurs relativement élevées de sainteté. Nous l'avons vu, dans ses premiers romans, se vautrer dans la boue naturaliste...' Elizabeth M. Fraser, Le Renouveau religieux d'après le roman français de 1886 à 1914, 1934, p.135. Naturalism for this author is 'l'étalage de la pire pornographie' (p.42).
12. The term used by P. Perret, Moniteur universel, 11 March 1879.
13. J. Huret, op. cit., p.211.
14. Ibid., p.205.
15. Lettres inédites à Arid Prins, Geneva, 1977, p.190.
16. M.-L. Issaurat-Deslaef, 'La-bas: logique et signification du du fantastique', BSH, 69, 1978.
17. M. Milner, introduction to BSH, 170-71, 1978.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. Quoted from G. Flaubert, Extraits de la correspondance ou préface à la vie d'écrivain, présentation et choix de Genevieve Bolleme, 1963, p.277.
2. Les Romanciers naturalistes. Oeuvres complètes. XI, 136 (Cercle du livre précieux, 1966-69). All references to works by Zola are to this edition unless otherwise stated.
3. H. Bachelin, J.-K. Huysmans: du naturalisme littéraire au naturalisme mystique. 1926.
4. Quoted by P. Cogny, J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité. 1953, p.131.
5. '...il plut à J.-K. Huysmans de promener sur l'art ambiant le regard d'un voyant, d'opérer, au premier coup d'oeil, dans le fatras des expositions, le tri de la postérité.' R. Marx, J.-K. Huysmans. 1893, p.8.
6. H.M. Block, Naturalistic Triptych: the Fictive and the Real in Zola, Mann and Dreiser. New York, 1970, p.4.
7. P. Martino, Le Naturalisme français. 1969, p.11.
8. M. Praz, The Romantic Agony. 2nd ed., 1970, p.2.
9. See e.g. C. Bauchat, Histoire du naturalisme français. 2 vols, 1949.
10. See J.-H. Bornecque and P. Cogny, Réalisme et naturalisme. 1958.
11. C.A. Burns, 'Naturalism and religion: a note on the case of Henry Céard' in Literature and Society: Studies in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century French Literature presented to R.J. North. University of Birmingham, 1980.
12. 'Ce soir, Huysmans, Céard, Hennique, Paul Alexis, Octave Mirbeau, Guy de Maupassant, la jeunesse des lettres réaliste, naturaliste, nous a sacrés, Flaubert, Zola et moi, sacrés officiellement les trois maîtres de l'heure présente, dans un dîner des plus cordiaux et des plus gais. Voici l'armée nouvelle en train de se former.' E. de Goncourt, Journal. 16 April 1877 (XI, 138-39, 1956).
13. See P. Cogny, Le Huysmans intime de Henry Céard et Jean de Caldain. 1957, p.155.
See also J. Richepin, 'Les Six Naturalistes', Cil Blas. 21 April 1880 (reprinted in Les Marges. 9, 1930).
14. H. Céard, Une belle journée. 1881; P. Adam, Chair molle. 1885; P. Bonnetain, Charlot s'amuse. 1883; L. Hennique, Deux nouvelles. 1881; P. Alexis, La Fin de Lucie Pellegrin. 1880; L. Fèvre-Desprez, Autour d'un clocher. 1884.
15. Lettres inédites à Émile Zola. Geneva/Lille 1953, c. 25 May 1884, p. 104.

16. Copies of Huysmans' letters to Théo Hannon can be found in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert 62. All references to this correspondence are to this source. Pierre Cogny is preparing an edition of these letters, based on the copies, to be published by Christian Bourgois.

17. Huysmans makes the same points in a letter to C. Lemonnier of March 1877. (Lettres inédites à Otille Lemonnier, Geneva/Paris, 1957, p.22.)

18. Helen Trudgian, L'Esthétique de J.-K. Huysmans, 1934, p.63.

19. Richepin was sentenced to a month's imprisonment in 1876 after publishing La Chanson des gueux. (R. Baldick, La Vie de J.-K. Huysmans, 1958, p.47.)

Co-author with H. Fevre of the anti-clerical novel Autour d'un clocher. Desprez was imprisoned for a month in 1885. (H. Mitterand, introduction to Autour d'un clocher, Slatkine, Geneva, 1980.)

20. The Revue moderne et naturaliste was founded in December 1878 by Harry Alis and survived till October 1880. It had little connection with the Médan group, though it published Alexis's Les Femmes du Père Lefevre. (See R. Pouilliat, Le Romantisme III 1869-1896, 1968.)

21. P. Cogny, 'Un projet avorté de roman: La Faim de J.-K. Huysmans', BHLF, Sept.-Oct. 1979. Cogny prints the text of Huysmans' manuscript notes for the novel, the original of which is in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert.

22. Huysmans writes to Hannon on 15 February 1882: 'je suis en train de buriner mon premier chapitre du Gros-Caillou un bal de tabatières et de fantassins, de putains et de cuirassiers, ça va pas trop mal. On chahute assez roide et ça pue ferme dans ce chapitre.' This chapter of the unfinished novel was finally published as 'Le Bal de la Brasserie Européenne à Grenelle' in the second edition of Croquis parisiens, 1886.

23. Lettres à Zola, 15 November 1882, p.90.

24. Lettres inédites à Jules Destrée, Geneva/Paris, 1967, p.32.

25. For instance, on 23 February 1888, he writes to A. Prins: 'Au fond, toutes les Soirées de Médan sont composées de charcutiers, de commerçants. Il n'y en a pas un seul parmi eux - et j'ai honte d'en avoir fait partie - qui soit réellement soulevé par l'art.' While on 31 October 1888, he tells Prins that he is filled with such scorn for Le Rêve that he daren't go to see Zola for fear of revealing his true feelings.

Lettres inédites à Aril Prins, Geneva, 1977, p.112, pp.145-46.

26. To Louis de Robert and Émile Lapaix, Fonds Lambert 49.

27. To Prins, op. cit., 3 April 1893, p.253.

28. Ibid., p.36.

29. Reprinted in BSH 25, 1953.

30. André Thérive remarks of Le Drageoir aux épices, and particularly 'L'Extase' and 'Ballade chlorotique': 'l'outrance pourrait encore sentir la gageure ou la farce juvénile, si l'on ne savait comme elle fut soutenue dans les oeuvres suivantes.' 'J.-K. Huysmans: essai de psychologie religieuse', Le Correspondant, 25 April 1924, p.241.

See also J.-M. Seillan, 'Variations sur un air (in)connu: motifs et scénarios fantasmatiques dans le Drageoir aux épices', BSH 73, 1981.

31. J. Lemaitre, Les Contemporains, première série, 1884-85 ('Émile Zola', p.264).

32. 'Les tons, les nuances, les lignes que le pinceau peut seul reproduire, ils font cette gageure de les rendre sensibles avec des phrases écrites; et c'est alors un labeur, un effort désespéré des mots pour prendre forme et couleur, une lutte du dictionnaire contre la palette, des phrases qui ont des airs de glaciés, des substantifs qui sont des frottis, des épithètes qui sont des touches piquées, des adverbes qui sont des empâtements, une transcription d'art enragée...'

'Mais on aura beau faire, une page écrite ne sera jamais l'équivalent d'un tableau.'

Ibid., troisième série ('Edmond et Jules de Goncourt', p.76, p.78).

33. 'C'était comme les écrins, vidés à terre, de quelque fille des eaux, des parures inouïes et bizarres, un ruissellement, un entassement de colliers, de bracelets monstrueux, de broches gigantesques, de bijoux barbares, dont l'usage échappait.'

Le Ventre de Paris, ch. 3, II, 648.

34. 'il les disait en satin moiré, ne trouvant pas de mot pour peindre cette douceur soyeuse, ces longues allées fraîches, ces chairs légères qui retombaient à larges plis, comme des jupes accrochées de danseuses. Il parlait de gaze, de dentelle laissant voir la hanche d'une jolie femme.' Ibid., ch. 4, II, 712-14.

35. '...les boudins, noirs, roulés comme des couleuvres bonnes filles; les andouilles, empilées deux à deux, crevant de santé; les saucissons, pareils à des échines de chantre, dans leurs chapes d'argent; les pâtes, tout chauds, portant les petits drapeaux de leurs étiquettes...' Ibid., ch. 1, II, 597.

36. H.M. Block, op. cit., pp.10-11.

37. G. King, Garden of Zola, 1978.

38. A. Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman, 1963, p.135.

39. Ibid., p.129, p.139.

40. 'Faire vrai consiste...à donner l'illusion complète du vrai, suivant la logique ordinaire des faits, et non à les transcrire servilement dans le pêle-mêle de leur succession.' Maupassant, 'Le Roman', Romans (Albin Michel), 1975, p.835.

Susan Sontag quotes Ortega y Gasset as saying in his The Dehumanization of Art: 'During the nineteenth century artists proceeded in all too impure a fashion. They reduced

the strictly aesthetic elements to a minimum and let the work consist almost entirely in a fiction of human realities... Works of this kind are only partially works of art, or artistic objects....' Against Interpretation. 1967, p.24 n.

See also note 157 below.

41. R. Baldick, 'Huysmans and the Goncourts', French Studies, 6, 1952.

42. F.W.J. Hemmings has argued that nothing has ever damaged Zola's reputation more than the six books of criticism and theory published between 1880 and 1882. (Émile Zola, 1970, p.151.) For a more recent, less hostile assessment, see D. Bell, 'Serres's Zola: literature, science, myth', MLN, May 1979.

43. X,1179; X,1194.

44. X,1188. Zola's faith in science, writes Colette Becker, 'repose sur une double certitude: celle de la possibilité d'un savoir exhaustif, et celle du perfectionnement intellectuel et moral de l'humanité par ce savoir.' 'Aux sources du Naturalisme zolien 1860-1865', Le Naturalisme, 1978, p.26.

45. X,1228-29.

46. X, 1339-40.

47. Introduction to Le Roman expérimental (Garnier-Flammariion), 1971, p.43.

D.G. Charlton defines positivism as follows: "Philosophical positivism" is a theory of knowledge. It holds, in its simplest form, that, excepting knowledge of logical and mathematical systems -- all of them without any necessary connexion with our observable world -- science provides the model of the only kind of knowledge we can attain. All that we can know of reality is what we can observe or can legitimately deduce from what we observe. That is to say, we can only know phenomena and the laws of relation and succession of phenomena, and it follows that everything we can claim to know must be capable of empirical verification. Positivism thus denies the validity of such alleged means of knowing as have been termed a priori, and it equally denies that we can have any knowledge about religious and metaphysical questions since these are by definition largely concerned with a realm alleged to lie beyond phenomena, in a world that can never be observed.' Positivist Thought in France during the Second Empire 1852-1870. 1959, pp.5-6.

48. Quoted in Huysmans, Oeuvres complètes. II,193-94.

49. Les Soeurs Vatard is 'une tranche de la vie des brocheuses, ordurières et exactes,' according to Huysmans (as A. Meunier) in 'J.-K. Huysmans', En marge. (Lesage) 1927, p.56.

50. An intention summed up by Baudelaire's famous saying, 'J'ai pétri de la boue et j'en ai fait de l'or.'

51. F.W.J. Hemmings, The Life and Times of Émile Zola. 1977, p.84.

52. I,520.

53. I,520.

54. The conclusion of Marthe, appropriately enough, shows the dissection of the corpse of one of the main characters.

55. In a preface written in 1879 to Hannon's Rimes de joie (1881), Huysmans even talks of naturalist poetry, which indicates the looseness of his thinking about naturalism. Dismissing the Parnassians, he comments: 'J'attends que le naturalisme, qui, à défaut d'un poème en vers, a du moins produit le plus beau poème en prose que je connaisse: La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, fasse comme pour le roman, balaie tout ce fatras d'insanités et de balivernes.' En marge, p.43.

P. Cogny suggests that Huysmans' public attachment to naturalism was purely mercenary. (Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité, p.13.)

56. M. Raimond, La Crise du roman, 1966, p.26.

57. L. Deffoux and E. Zavie, Le Groupe de Médan, 1920, p.15.

58. 'In an age when writers rely on inflated rhetoric both to express and make up for their spiritual désœuvrement, for what they themselves complain of as an emptiness of experience, Stendhal is unique in his use of understatement merely to outline a fullness of being, to hint at the intensity of a briefly ~~fit~~ harmony between the self and the world.' 'Stendhal, so to speak, always rushes beyond his writing; something more important than language keeps him from excessively worrying about the shape or artistic "rightness" of particular passages.'

L. Bersani, Balzac to Beckett, New York, 1970, pp.108-09, p.142.

59. See J. Dupont, 'Huysmans: le corps dépeint', RHLF Nov.-Dec. 1980.

60. Again, he praises the naturalness of the characters in a bourgeois group portrait by Caillebotte: 'ils s'occupent, sans pose pour la galerie, sans cette attitude des gens dont on prépare le portrait.' L'Art moderne, p.112.

61. Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1846', Curiosités esthétiques, (Garnier) 1962, p.198.

62. Ibid., 'Salon de 1859', p.329.

63. Ibid., p.320.

64. Ibid., p.319.

65. Ibid., 'Exposition universelle de 1855', p.240.

66. Ibid., 'Le peintre de la vie moderne', p.464.

67. 'Huysmans se sépare...de Baudelaire dans la mesure où il demande à l'artiste de peindre exactement ce qu'il voit plutôt que ce qu'il rêve, mais il s'en rapproche lorsqu'il veut découvrir dans l'œuvre de l'artiste une âme, un tempérament.'

C. Maingon, L'Univers artistique de J.-K. Huysmans, 1977, p.30.

68. A phrase which clearly echoes Zola's defence in the preface to Thérèse Raquin that 'l'étude sincère purifie tout, comme le feu.' (I,522) See also note 50 above.

69. P. Ward-Jackson, 'Art historians and art critics VIII: Huysmans', The Burlington Magazine, Nov. 1967, p.618.

Compare Cyprien's exclamation in ch. five of En ménage: 'Ah! si tous, tant que nous sommes, nous n'étions pas gangrenés par le romantisme, si au lieu de guérir notre infection, nous ne nous bornions pas à la blanchir, si l'on inventait enfin un iodure qui puisse dépurger les cervelles d'artiste, nous venions, à coup sûr, bien d'autres beautés qui nous échappent!' (pp. 129-30)

70. 'The realistic novel...works by concealing the art by which it is produced, and invites discussion in terms of content rather than form, ethics and thematics rather than poetics and aesthetics.' D. Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing, 1979, p.52.

71. Huysmans' own 'naturalist' vocabulary in this discussion might be noted ('rendre visible (...) l'extérieur de la bête humaine, (...) démonter le mécanisme de ses passions...', L'Art moderne, p.136).

72. E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion, New York, 1960, p.87.

73. *Ibid.*, p.36, p.38.

74. In ch. five of A rebours, this literary overlaying of Moreau is repeated. His Salomés are 'cet art qui franchissait les limites de la peinture;' (p.90) and similarly, Odilon Redon's drawings 'sautaient par-dessus les bornes de la peinture.' (p.97)

75. Thus F. Schalk writes of Huysmans' description of Raffaëlli's 'Route de la révolte': 'Die Beschreibung erinnert an ein Prosa-gedicht, das die Natur zum Medium künstlerischen Fühlens macht.' 'Bemerkungen zur Kunstkritik von Huysmans', Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur, 77, 1967, p.128.

Similarly, M. Eigeldinger characterises Huysmans' writings as 'de la méditation sur l'oeuvre d'art par le moyen de l'écriture poétique.' 'Huysmans découvreur d'Odilon Redon', RSH, 170-71, April-Sept. 1978, p.215.

76. Baudelaire, 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne', op. cit., p.486.

77. 'La critique d'art de Huysmans est infirmée du fait qu'il ne juge pas certaines oeuvres en fonctions de leurs valeurs plastiques. Il les apprécie lorsqu'elles se prêtent à des transpositions correspondant à ses thèmes littéraires.' C. Maingon, op. cit., p.121.

'Huysmans a délaissé la critique, enivré de la joie des phrases à ciseler d'après les tableaux soumis à ses appréciations.' E. Demolder, 'J.-K. Huysmans critique d'art', La Société nouvelle, 5e année, 2, 1889, p.429.

'Si l'on doit constater l'originalité de ses jugements sur la production artistique, au cours des années décisives qui vont de 1880 à 1883, on n'est pas moins forcé d'avouer que Huysmans n'a jamais su apprécier, dans sa totalité, la technique des impressionnistes.' Helen Trudgian, op. cit., p.98.

78. H. Amer, 'Huysmans et la peinture', CTSJ, 8, 1963, p.46.

79. 'L'essentiel est que Huysmans ait voulu par l'entremise de des Esseintes créer un mythe autour de Moreau et de son oeuvre, et par là conférer une valeur nouvelle à la peinture. Le mythe dans le domaine des arts est plus révélateur que le vrai.'
H. Amer, op. cit., p.40.

80. Ibid., p.43.

81. Ibid., pp.34-35.

82. Lettres à Zola, c. 25 May 1884, p.104.

83. Zola, on the other hand, told Jules Huret that he aspired to a sort of classicism of naturalism. (Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire, 1891.)

84. Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1846', op. cit., p.101.

85. 'Pour lui, le critique d'art devrait être un sauvage, plus verrouillé que retiré dans la tour d'ivoire.'

G. Coquiott, Le Vrai J.-K. Huysmans, 1912, p.71.

86. Writing to Redon around September 1889, Huysmans notes the odious presence of tourists in Paris, adding: 'Le besoin des égorgements se fait sentir. (...) Il y en avait, hier, en masse, au Louvre; ils sentaient le chien mouillé, souillaient les tableaux de leur haleine.' Quoted in BSH, 33, 1957, p.96.

87. J. Borie, 'Une littérature démocratique? La situation des écrivains naturalistes', in Qu'est-ce que la culture française (ed. J.-P. Aron), 1975.

A.W. Raitt observes that for Mallarmé, 'In his late poetry the world of everyday reality exists by virtue of its absence.' And generally, in the course of the nineteenth century, 'poetry moved away from being the lyrical consecration of universal human emotions to being a private cult of individual experiences.'
Life and Letters in France: the Nineteenth Century, 1965, p.139, p.xix.

88. J. Rostand, Le Droit d'être naturaliste, 1963, p.77.

It is perhaps misleading to suggest that the 'biological principle' inevitably overrides social concerns, even if this often happens in naturalist works. As J.W. Burrow observes, 'It is ironical that Darwin, who hated spitting worms for fishing, should have been one of the begetters of the strident power philosophers of the later nineteenth century. Even Marx and Engels adopted Darwinism as the biological counterpart to the class war(...) "The survival of the fittest" in a human context could be all things to all men.' Introduction to The Origin of Species. (Penguin) 1968, p.45.

89. E. Auerbach, Mimesis, (Gallimard) 1968, p.505.

90. Their personal lives give us 'une impression d'ensemble étrangement mesquine, celle du grand bourgeois égocentrique occupé de son confort esthétique, nerveux, tourmenté de diverses petites vexations, et obsédé par une manie -- une manie qui en l'espèce se nomme "littérature".' Ibid., p.501.

91. On 28 February 1898, Huysmans tells Prins that the Dreyfus Affair is having a detrimental effect on book sales. 'Zola s'est lancé dedans, pour jouer les Hugo, pour se faire de la réclame (...). Tous les gens véreux sont là-dedans, aux gages des Juifs (...). ça a développé l'anti-sémitisme, ce qui n'est pas sans me réjouir.' Lettres à Prins, p.313.

92. E. de Goncourt, Journal. 3 December 1871. Quoted by Auerbach, op. cit., p.493.

93. J. Borie sees the celibacy of Flaubert, the Goncourts, or Huysmans as being symptomatic of their aesthetic detachment, in Le Célibataire français, 1976.

Flaubert remarks 'La vie n'est tolérable qu'à condition de n'y jamais être' (to Louise Colet, 5-6 March 1853), but at the same time insists on a scientific rigour in art: 'Il est temps de lui donner, par une méthode impitoyable, la précision des sciences physiques!' (To Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, 18 March 1857.) Quoted from Extraits de la correspondance, op. cit., p.104, p.188.

94. The Goncourts were prosecuted for outraging public morality in 1853, for verses on Venus which had appeared in L'Éclair the previous year. They were acquitted. (R. Baldick, The Goncourts, 1960)

95. Germinie Lacerteux, ed. E. Caramaschi, Naples/Paris, 1968, p.2.

D. Lodge writes: 'A working definition of realism might be: the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in nonliterary texts of the same culture. Realistic fiction, being concerned with the action of individuals in time, approximates to history: "history is a novel which happened; the novel is history as it might have happened" as the Goncourt brothers put it. Thus the realistic novel, from its beginnings in the eighteenth century, modelled its language on historical writing of various kinds, formal and informal: biography, autobiography, travelogue, letters, diaries, journalism and historiography.' Op. cit., p.25.

96. A. Guedj, 'Le Naturalisme avant Zola', RSH, 160, Oct.-Dec. 1975, p.574.

97. To Hannon, 16 October 1879, Fonds Lambert.

98. For Anita Brookner, Rops is 'the indifferently talented Belgian pornographer.' The Genius of the Future, London/ New York, 1971, p.160. See also P. Ward-Jackson, op. cit., p.620.

99. 'Le sexe féminin, pour Rops et la plupart de ses contemporains, est cet infernal four, si rose, si noir, où la folie des hommes s'engouffre et se consume.' J.-L. Bachelier, 'Le Graveleur: Félicien Rops et Joris-Karl Huysmans', in Des mots et des couleurs, (ed. P. Bonnefis and P. Reboul, Université de Lille III) 1979, p.71.

100. Ibid., p.76.

101. 'Quel abominable mufle! (Zola) il est vraiment temps que je fasse mon livre sur le satanisme au moyen âge et dans les temps modernes, car je vomis dans le premier chapitre sur le naturalisme, tel qu'il est devenu: scientifique et matérialiste et amoureux de son temps.' Lettres à Prins, 7 April 1890, p.190.

102. 'En somme, (le naturalisme) n'a fouillé que des dessous de nombril et banalement divagué dès qu'il s'approchait des aînés; c'est un herniaire de sentiments, un bandagiste d'âme et voilà tout!' (La-bas, I, 13)

103. C. Maingon, op. cit., pp.136-37.

104. Ibid., p.144.

105. '...il n'est pas admissible, vous le savez bien, qu'un libertin se convertisse en gardant sa concubine: à plus forte raison, un écrivain ses mauvais livres.' Abbé F. Belleville, La Conversion de M. Huysmans, Bourges, 1898, p.9.

106. In his study of nineteenth-century prostitution, A. Corbin draws heavily on novels of the period for evidence, observing: 'Les conduites prostitutionnelles sont devenues un des thèmes essentiels du roman et de l'art pictural; littérature et peinture symbolistes et décadentistes témoignent d'une névrose collective qui se traduit tout à la fois par une vertigineuse attirance et par une peur morbide de la sexualité féminine.' Les Filles de noce, 1978, pp.186-87.

107. According to Zola in Les Romanciers naturalistes. 'Une des tendances des romanciers naturalistes est de briser et d'élargir le cadre du roman. Ils veulent sortir du conte, de l'éternelle histoire, de l'éternelle intrigue, qui promène les personnages au travers des mêmes péripéties, pour les tuer ou les marier au dénouement.' (XI, 170)

Such claims to high seriousness are not dissimilar to those of Robbe-Grillet, who announces that 'raconter pour distraire est futile...' (op. cit., p.33).

108. As P. Cogny and A. Artinian say in their introduction to La-haut (Tournai, 1965), after La-bas. 'ce n'était plus Huysmans qui créait Durtal, mais Durtal qui menait Huysmans.' (p.16)

109. J. Laver, The First Decadent, 1954, p.265.

110. A. Buisine, 'Le Taxidermiste', RSH, 170-71, April-Sept. 1978.

111. P. Duployé, Huysmans, 1968, pp.44-45.

112. H. Markiewicz, 'Le Naturalisme dans les recherches et dans l'esthétique du XXe siècle', Revue de littérature comparée, April-June 1973, p.257.

113. 'Le naturalisme partage avec les civilisations primitives l'obsession du secret sexuel de la vie qui entoure la naissance et la puberté. Ici cependant le tabou primitif est franchi et offensé (...) par le geste d'un intérêt purement médical, voire gynécologique et obstétrique. (...) Mais, parce que dans toutes les choses humaines et trop humaines ce n'est pas le côté moral qui intéresse le naturalisme, mais le côté pathologique, la nosographie sexuelle est un point de départ pour déclencher toute une avalanche de descriptions de maladies (...) Il faut remarquer cependant, que la préoccupation scientifique n'est qu'à la

superficie du naturalisme. Dans le subconscient, il y a l'obsession de la fatalité de la maladie. Cela peut être prouvé par le grand métaphorisme maladif.' H.A. Hatzfeld, 'Discussion sur le naturalisme français', Studies in Philology, 39, Oct. 1942, pp.703-04.

114. 'La plus grande réussite du naturalisme est la manière impressionniste qui apporte de nouvelles nuances suprasensibles et affecte profondément la syntaxe, surtout par l'ordre des mots, les constructions nominales et le style indirect libre.' Ibid., p.726.

115. Markiewicz, op. cit., p.264.

116. Zola, 'Lettre à la jeunesse', Le Roman expérimental, X,1223.

117. Ibid., X,1224.

118. 'Le Roman expérimental', X,1182.

119. Sartre, quoted by R. Bourneuf and R. Ouellet, L'Univers du roman, 1975, p.97.

120. R. Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950, vol. 4, The Later Nineteenth Century, New Haven/London, 1966, p.14.

121. X,1290.

122. H. Block, op. cit., p.14.

123. F. Boissin, 'Romans, contes et nouvelles', Polybiblion littéraire, 12, 1880, p.306.

124. One could of course make the same point about Freud. See note 135 below.

125. C. Beuchat, op. cit., vol. 2, p.131. But according to P. Martino: 'Huysmans avait rêvé de faire mieux encore. Il aurait, paraît-il, conçu un roman où l'on aurait vu un employé sortant de chez lui pour aller à son bureau; il se serait aperçu que ses souliers n'étaient point cirés; il les aurait fait cirer; pendant ce temps, il aurait vaguement rêvassé; puis il aurait repris son chemin... Et ç'aurait été tout; il aurait fallu tirer de là trois cents pages.' Le Naturalisme français, 1969, p.107.

126. M. Sachs, 'The Esthetics of Naturalism: Henry Céard's Une belle journée', L'Esprit créateur, IV, 2, Summer 1964.

127. I,519, 520.

128. F. Brunetière, 'La Confession d'un réfractaire', Revue des deux mondes, 1 March 1885, p.222.

129. F. Brunetière, Le Roman naturaliste, 1896, p.3. Barbey d'Aurevilly makes similar attacks on Zola (see Le Roman contemporain, 1902).

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129. F. Brunetière, Le Roman naturaliste, 1896, p.3. Barbey d'Aurevilly makes similar attacks on Zola (see Le Roman contemporain, 1902).

130. The naturalists' works 'are the most popular literary outcome of the doctrine which denies the personality, liberty, and spirituality of man and the objective foundation on which these rest, which empties him of the moral sense, the feeling of the infinite, the aspiration towards the Absolute, which makes of him nothing more than a sequence of action and reaction, and the first and last word of which is sensism.' W.S. Lilly, 'The New Naturalism', Fortnightly Review, 38, 1885, quoted in Documents of Modern Literary Realism, ed. G.J. Becker, Princeton, 1963, p.288.

131. Bourneuf and Ouellet, op. cit.

132. P. Cogny, Le Naturalisme, 1953, p.39.

133. Micheline Tison-Braun notes that 'de l'avis de Comte, l'individu n'existe pas en tant qu'unité psychologique autonome. Il possède une individualité biologique qui le prédestine à l'égoïsme mais aussi un instinct social qui le rend apte à la solidarité.' La Crise de l'humanisme, 1958, vol. 1, p.59.

134. C. Smethurst, Zola: Germinal, 1978, p.40.

135. Freud, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, (Standard Edition of Complete Works, ed. J. Strachey, vol. 6) 1960, p.20, p.242.

D. Stafford-Clark quotes R. Dabliez as saying: 'Freud's work is the most profound analysis that history has ever known of the less human elements in human nature' (What Freud really said, 1971, p.201). And F.J. Sulloway argues that 'The history of psychology in the nineteenth century may be viewed as essentially a development away from philosophy and toward biology' (Freud, Biologist of the Mind, 1979, p.251).

136. Zola writes in his 'notes de travail' to Le Rêve: 'Mon hérité, c'est le péché originel, transmis d'Adam et d'Eve à leurs descendants, et il n'y a plus que la grâce qui puisse le combattre (...) Dans mon bouquin, tout l'au-delà, tout le surnaturel que je veux mettre dans le milieu, c'est, à proprement parler, la grâce que Dieu envoie pour sauver mon héroïne.' Quoted by H. Guillemin, Zola légende et vérité, 1960, p.82.

While A. Corbin, in a recent article on 'L'Hérédosyphilis ou l'impossible rédemption: contribution à l'histoire de l'hérédité morbide' (Romantisme, 31, 1981) discerns at the end of the nineteenth century a pervasive fear, less of actual disease itself, than that 'le mal peut grapper à tous les âges de la vie, les innocents comme les coupables, sans espoir de totale rédemption.' (p.149)

137. Zola writes to Jules Lemaitre on 14 March 1885: 'Vous isolez l'homme de la nature, je ne le vois pas sans la terre, d'où il sort et où il rentre. (...) Mes personnages pensent autant qu'ils doivent penser, autant que l'on pense dans la vie courante. Toute la querelle vient de l'importance spiritualiste que vous donnez à la fameuse psychologie, celle que j'ai voulu avoir, celle de l'âme rendue à son rôle dans le vaste monde, redevenue la vie, se manifestant par tous les actes de la matière.' Quoted in Germinal, ed. H. Mitterand, (Pléiade) 1964, pp.1866-67.

Littre's definition of naturalism, quoted at the head of this chapter, can be usefully set beside its literary manifestations.

138. Joan Yvonne Dangelzer, La Description du milieu dans le roman français de Balzac à Zola, 1938, p.63.

139. Germinal 'dépeuple les masses du rôle de protagonistes qu'elles jouent dans l'Histoire et intemporalise leur combat en le détournant vers la lutte éternelle de l'Homme et de la Nature.' Paule Lejeune, Germinal: un roman antipeuple, 1978, p.76.

140. G. Lukács, The Historical Novel, 1962, p.182.

141. T. Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 1976, pp.30-31.

142. 'La description extrêmement détaillée et littérairement parfaite de processus physiologiques elle-même -- qu'il s'agisse d'acte sexuel, de tourments ou de peines -- entraîne un nivellement de la nature sociale, historique et morale de l'homme. Elle n'est pas un moyen, mais un obstacle, à la mise en relief, dans leur complexité et leur totalité, des conflits humains essentiels, qui éclairent toute la voie. C'est la raison pour laquelle (...) le contenu et les moyens d'expression nouveaux du naturalisme n'apportent pas un enrichissement, mais plutôt un appauvrissement et un rétrécissement de la grande littérature.'

G. Lukács, Balzac et le réalisme français, 1967, pp.10-11.

143. B. Nelson, 'Lukács, Zola and the Aesthetics of Realism', Studi Francesi, 71, 1980, p.253. See also P. Brady, 'Lukács, Zola, and the Principle of Contradiction', L'Esprit créateur, XXI, 3, Fall 1981.

144. B. Nelson, op. cit., p.254.

145. Ibid., p.255.

146. Ibid., p.254.

147. R. Terdiman, The Dialectics of Isolation, New Haven/London, 1976, p.69. In L'Éducation sentimentale, Terdiman argues, 'the revolution of 1848 (...), the event around which the novel is organized, is precisely the historical event which finally made it impossible for writers to believe in history.' (p.69)

148. R.-P. Colin, Schopenhauer en France: un mythe naturaliste, Lyon, 1979. See also T.G. West, 'Schopenhauer, Huysmans, and French naturalism', Journal of European Studies, 1, 1971.

149. Letter of 15 October 1879, quoted by Colin, op. cit., p.158.

150. P. Citti, 'Du miroir de Saint-Réal à celui de Narcisse', Littérature, 33, Feb. 1979. While in a previous article, Citti remarks: 'le roman isole un personnage de son milieu, structurellement, même si l'auteur veut ne pas l'en séparer. Aussitôt cette individualité cause sa perte, elle est un élément morbide.' 'La Notion de milieu: le roman et l'idée de décadence vers 1870', in L'Esprit de décadence, (Colloque de Nantes 1976), 1980, p.51.

151. Colin, op. cit., p.105.

152. Consequently, 'La vision moniste de Schopenhauer débouche... sur un idéal quasi mystique, une éthique transcendante.' Ibid., p.24.

153. 'La résignation chez Céard est soumission au vouloir-vivre, chez Schopenhauer, elle est abnégation, lutte de l'homme contre sa propre nature.' Ibid., p.164.

154. 'Pour Zola, le refus de l'action n'est jamais qu'un signe d'impuissance: le romancier ne peut concevoir la recherche délibérée d'une existence ascétique puisque l'homme se doit, selon lui, d'entrer dans les voies de la Nature où tout a un sens.' Ibid., p.170.

155. Ibid., p.153.

156. S. Heath, The Nouveau Roman, 1972, p.23, p.34.

157. T. Todorov, Poétique, 1973, p.38.

158. Ricardou, quoted by Bourneuf and Ouellet, op. cit., p.207.

159. 'Mauvaises pensées et autres', quoted by P. Hamon, 'Un discours contraint', Poétique, 16, 1973.

160. To Louise Colet, 16 January 1852, Extraits de la correspondance, op. cit., p.61.

161. L. Bersani, op. cit., p.185.

162. Ibid., p.143.

163. J. Dubois, 'Surcodage et protocole de lecture dans le roman naturaliste', Poétique, 16, 1973, p.491, p.494.

164. 'La caractéristique fondamentale du discours réaliste est de nier, de rendre impossible le récit, tout récit. Car plus il se sature de descriptions, plus également il est contraint de multiplier thématique vide et redondances, plus aussi il s'organise et se répète, donc se referme sur soi: de référentiel, il devient purement anaphorique; au lieu de citer le réel ("choses", "événements") il se cite lui-même perpétuellement.'

P. Hamon, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une description?', Poétique, 12, 1972, p.485.

165. Vogüé says Flaubert and his successors with their nihilism and pessimism offer a distorted view of the world, adding: 'Cette littérature a cru suppléer à tout par des raffinements d'art égoïstes; ce travers l'a conduite à se constituer en mandarinat, à s'isoler de la vie générale, dont elle devrait être la servante.' 'De la littérature réaliste, à propos du roman russe', Revue des deux mondes, 15 May 1886, p.302.

See also F. Brunetière, Le Roman naturaliste, 1896; C. Bigot, 'L'Esthétique naturaliste', Revue des deux mondes, 15 September 1879; J. Lemaitre, Les Contemporains, 1ère série, n.d.

166. E.g. C. Beauchat, op. cit.; P. Cogny, Le Naturalisme, 1953; F.W.J. Hemmings, 'The Origin of the terms naturalisme, naturaliste', French Studies, 8, April 1954.

167. Realism for Zola seems to amount to achieving a fusion of personal vision and transparency before the fixed source of nature: 'Ce que je cherche avant tout dans un tableau, c'est un homme et non pas un tableau.'

Il y a, selon moi, deux éléments dans une oeuvre: l'élément réel, qui est la nature, et l'élément individuel, qui est l'homme.' ('Mon Salon', 1866, XII, 797.) And he adds: 'J'appelle réelle, une oeuvre qui vit, une oeuvre dont les personnages puissent se mouvoir et parler.' (Ibid., XII, 809.) Thus Manet is seen as rejecting precepts and conventions in order to 'voir la nature telle qu'elle est, sans la regarder dans les oeuvres et dans les opinions des autres'; and the absolute for Zola is not some ideal of beauty but 'reality': 'La réalité est ici l'élément fixe'. ('Edouard Manet', 1867, XII, 828, 829-30.)

Lilian R. Furst argues that Zola supported the Impressionists more in order to attack established authority than from real appreciation. 'Evidently Zola envisaged painting as illustrated thought, and not in terms of colour and contour, light and shadow, pattern and form. (...) He failed to grasp and to examine many of the essentials of the visual arts: shape, perspective, solidity, composition, volume, tonal effects, perception of planes, drawing and modelling. These are largely absent from his art criticism for the simple reason that they were outside his range of interest in pictures as an expression of ideas.' 'Zola's Art Criticism', in French 19th Century Painting and Literature, (ed. U. Finke) Manchester, 1972, pp. 175-76.

Huysmans himself provided an outline of the function of the art critic in a rarely quoted preface published in 1901: 'Pour moi, la seule critique d'art qui mérite qu'on l'adule doit se comprendre de la sorte: il faut résumer la biographie du peintre et les origines de son art, montrer ses tenants et ses aboutissants, expliquer le sujet qu'il traite, en indiquer les sources, s'il s'agit, par exemple d'une vie de Saint ou d'une légende, puis définir son talent, l'analyser en décelant les ruses de son métier et les qualités de sa technique, révéler les sensations personnelles qu'il suggère et surtout décrire le tableau de telle façon que celui qui en lit la traduction écrite, le voie. C'est bien des choses, direz-vous; sans doute, mais les Goncourt les ont réalisées dans leurs définitives études sur un art que j'apprécie encore moins que celui de la Renaissance, sur l'art du XVIII^e siècle. Ce résultat peut donc être atteint si celui qui entreprend ce travail est à la fois un commissaire-priseur et un savant, et avant tout un artiste.' J.-K. Huysmans, 'La Jeunesse du Pérugin et les origines de l'école ombrienne', in En marge, (Lesage) 1927, p. 166.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

Paul Alexis, aged twenty-one, had his poem 'A l'amphithéâtre' published as a supposed inédit of Baudelaire in Le Figaro, 8 January 1869. (Quoted from P. Alexis, Lettres inédites de Paul Alexis à Émile Zola, ed. B.H. Bakker, Toronto, 1971, p.7 n.17.) As Bakker drily remarks, 'L'imposture fut bientôt découverte' (p.7).

1. Quoted by R. Pouillart, Le Romantisme III 1869-1896, 1968, p.110. According to Professor C. Burns, 'Au fond c'est Flaubert, bien plus que Zola ou Goncourt, qui fut, bien malgré lui, le père du naturalisme.' (Edmond de Goncourt and Henry Céard, Correspondance inédite 1876-1896, ed. C. Burns, 1965, p.47 n.3.)

2. Letter of November 1891 to Louis de Robert and Émile Lapaix, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert 49.

3. According to F.W.J. Hemmings, 'Private determinism is replaced in L'Éducation sentimentale by the ebb and flow of the tide of history.' The Age of Realism, 1974, p.175.

4. Histoire littéraire de la France, vol. 10, 1873-1913, ed. C. Duchet, 1978, p.127.

5. Zola 'lie "la névrose qui agite (le) siècle" non seulement à l'hérédité, mais encore à l'époque, aux phénomènes politiques et sociaux.' Colette Becker, *ibid.*, p.121.

6. G. de Saint-Valry, La Patrie, 11 March 1879.

7. M. Raimond, 'L'Expression des sentiments dans la tradition naturaliste', Cahiers de l'association internationale des études françaises, 26, May 1974, p.270.

Harry Levin remarks: 'Our excuse for studying literary history is that the mediocre works help us to place the masterpieces. By establishing the rules we learn to recognise the exceptions.' The Gates of Horn, New York, 1966, p.66.

8. R.-P. Colin, Schopenhauer en France: un mythe naturaliste, Lyon, 1979, p.203.

9. See R. Baldick, La Vie de J.-K. Huysmans, 1958, pp.49-50.

10. 'J'ai accepté, à cause de MARTHE de faire une préface enlevée de cette obscénité de Musset. Ce qui me navre, là-dedans, c'est que cet ouvrage m'a été proposé sur la lecture de MARTHE, ainsi, il y a des gens qui assimilent ça à un livre dégoûtant?' To Céard, September 1876, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert 46.

11. E. de Goncourt, Journal, 3 October 1876, XI, 104-05.

12. Quoted by P. Cogné, ed., Marthe, 1955, p.34.

13. Cogné, *op. cit.* R. Baldick, Marthe (Fortune Press, n.d.).

14. H. Olrik, 'Marthe: une prostituée du XIXe siècle', BSH, 170-71, April-Sept. 1978. Y. Clogenson, 'Autour de Huysmans et Gide', BSH, 58, 1971, quoted p.33.

15. Huysmans, Lettres inédites à Edmond de Goncourt. 1956. quoted p.49.
16. Olrik, op. cit., p.281.
17. Cogny, op. cit., p.47.
18. Ibid., p.45.
19. Olrik, op. cit., p.277.
20. In his preface to La Fille Elisa, Edmond de Goncourt writes: 'la prostitution et la prostituée, ce n'est qu'un épisode; la prison et la prisonnière: voilà l'intérêt de mon livre.' (Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979, p.18.)
21. Cogny, op. cit., p.175 n.15.
22. 'Sonnet saignant' in Parnasse satyrique du XIXe siècle. Brussels 1881.
23. Huysmans is fond of presenting love or sex in terms of drinking in Marthe: she is a 'servante attitrée d'une buvette d'amour' (p.32); thanks to poverty, 'le vin d'amour est bien vite cuvé' (p.61). This metaphorical substitution of one 'appetite' for another seems typically naturalist, and is used extensively by Huysmans, especially in A vau-l'eau.
24. Cogny, op. cit., p.174 n.11.
25. R.-P. Colin, op. cit., p.205.
26. E. Juin, preface to Marthe/Les Soeurs Vatard. (Union Générale d'Éditions) 1975, p.8.
27. Cogny, op. cit., p.187 n.12.
28. 'Cette fin qui n'en est pas une est à coup sûr plus conforme à la réalité que la mort qui est usée comme un vieux drame ou les hideuses lourdeurs de feu Ponsard de l'Académie française.' Huysmans to Hannon, 16 December 1876, Fonds Lambert 62.
29. 'Coriolis s'était promis de ne pas se marier, non qu'il eût de la répugnance contre le mariage; mais le mariage lui semblait un bonheur refusé à l'artiste. Le travail de l'art, la poursuite de l'invention, l'incubation silencieuse de l'oeuvre, la concentration de l'effort lui paraissaient impossibles avec la vie conjugale, aux côtés d'une jeune femme caressante et distrayante, ayant contre l'art la jalousie d'une chose plus aimée qu'elle, faisant autour du travailleur le bruit d'un enfant, brisant ses idées...' Manette Salomon. (Flammarion/Fasquelle n.d.) p.154.
Zola rejects this thesis of woman destroying the artist in his study of the Goncourts in Les Romanciers naturalistes. See also J. Borie, Le Célibataire français. 1976.
30. See for example 'L'Ambulante', Croquis parisiens: A vau-l'eau: En route.
31. Olrik, op. cit., p.274.

32. For a description of Marthe's charms, see p.46.
33. Cogny, op. cit., p.172 n.3.
34. According to R. Baldick, Marthe is 'A creature of instinct... in no way responsible for her actions'; Huysmans' 'characterisation of Marthe is indeed little more than a study of animal life.' 'The Novels of J.-K. Huysmans', unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1953, vol. 1, p.120.
35. See H. Juin, introduction to Charlot s'amuse, Geneva 1979.
36. L. Bloy, Le Désespéré. Oeuvres, 1964, III, 294.
37. Introduction to Charlot s'amuse, op. cit.: Ironically, Bonnetain was acquitted in December 1884 by the same jury which, a week earlier, had condemned Louis Desprez for Autour d'un clocher. See E. de Goncourt and H. Céard, op. cit., p.103 n.1.
38. G.J. Becker, ed., Documents of Modern Literary Realism, Princeton, 1963, p.344.
39. 'Il le soupçonnait d'avoir une mauvaise habitude. Pourquoi pas? Des gens graves la conservent toute leur vie, et on prétend que le duc d'Angoulême s'y livrait.'
40. Charlot s'amuse, pp.vii-ix.
41. Ibid., pp.112-13. One finds a similar combination of anti-clericalism and perverted sexuality in Octave Mirbeau's novel, Sébastien Roch, 1890. Zola of course expressed a fierce opposition to clerical celibacy (in, for example, La Faute de l'abbé Mouret or Lourdes).
42. Charlot s'amuse, p.84. In Alexis' story 'Religion', we see 'un homme et une femme, deux êtres jeunes, sentant bouillonner leur sève, pris du besoin de s'accoupler au risque de se perpétuer!' Trente romans, 1895, p.184.
43. Charlot s'amuse, p.167. For an outline of 'l'écriture artiste', see: M. Cressot, La Phrase et le vocabulaire de J.-K. Huysmans, 1938; M. Turnell, The Art of French Fiction, 1959.
44. 'Sa sensibilité générale s'exaltait davantage à la suite de ces continuelles rechutes et, parfois, la nature lassée se refusait à réparer son travail détruit.' Charlot s'amuse, p.192.
45. Ibid., p.307.
46. Ibid., p.102.
47. Ibid., p.98.
48. 'Il va sans dire que cette instabilité nous est présentée comme typiquement pathologique: onanisme, pédérastie, priapisme, autant de manifestations encore une fois interchangeables d'une perversité qualifiée, d'une incurable névrose accompagnée de tous

les signes ambiants d'un terrain médico-social dégénéré -- alcoolisme, crasse, promiscuité, déchéance familiale, hérédité catastrophique (Charlot, devenu adulte, retrouve sa vieille mère en assistant par hasard à un cours de Charcot à la Salpêtrière: nymphomane et hystérique, recluse depuis sept ans, elle sert de matériel pédagogique au grand savant).'
J. Borie, op. cit., pp.101-02.

49. A. Corbin, 'L'Hérédosyphilis ou l'impossible rédemption', Romantisme, 31, 1981, p.146. See also chapter eleven, 'The New Product - Masturbatory Insanity', in T.S. Szasz, The Manufacture of Madness, 1977.

50. 'Le roman est gâté par un esprit systématique, visible dans le thème de l'hérédité comme dans celui de l'éducation, et par un anticléricalisme lassant.' R. Pouilliat, op. cit., p.120.

51. Olrik, op. cit., p.280.

52. Cogny, op. cit., introduction.

53. 'Partout ces auteurs procèdent par petites touches: dans la composition, où des chapitres courts juxtaposent de successives observations, dans l'invention des personnages, fabriqués le plus souvent de minuscules pièces de rapport, dans la psychologie de ces créatures dont les passions se monnaient en d'innombrables sensations ténues et distinctes, et jusque dans la représentation même de leur époque, confiée à une poussière d'anecdotes.'
R. Ricatte, La Création romanesque chez les Goncourt, 1953, p.462.

54. H. Trudgian, L'Esthétique de J.-K. Huysmans, 1934, p.161. The descriptions of Laurent's visits to the morgue in chapter thirteen of Thérèse Raquin seem a much more obvious point of comparison.

55. Trudgian, op. cit., p.165.

56. M. Praz, The Romantic Agony, 2nd edition, 1970, p.125.

57. J. Huret, Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire, 1891, p.76.

58. On the affiliations of Alexis with the decadents, see Sara Via, 'Une Phèdre décadente chez les naturalistes', RSH, 153, 1974.

59. Cf. A. Buisine, 'Le Taxidermiste', RSH, 170-71, 1978.

60. L. Hennique, Deux nouvelles, Brussels, 1881, p.17.

61. Ibid., p.18.

62. O. Mirbeau, Le Journal d'une femme de chambre, 1900, p.386.

63. L. Bloy, 'Deux fantômes', Histoires désobligeantes. Oeuvres, 1967, VI, 230.

64. Ibid., p.198.

65. J.B. Baronian observes, apropos of Bloy's Sueur de sang (1893) and Histoires désobligeantes (1894): 'Ce ne sont pas (...) de véritables textes fantastiques mais les situations incroyables, l'atmosphère d'irréalité, les visions frénétiques ou hallucinatoires qui les traversent d'un bout à l'autre leur confèrent une aura d'étrangeté et une élévation dramatique qu'on ne rencontre que très rarement dans la littérature française. (...) Bloy invente la littérature moderne de la provocation.'
- Panorama de la littérature fantastique de langue française, 1978, p.140.
66. 'Ce que M. Huysmans méprise en tant que réalité, il l'apprécie d'autant plus comme matière d'art. D'ordinaire, ce qui intéresse dans l'oeuvre d'art, c'est à la fois l'objet exprimé et l'expression même, la traduction et l'interprétation de cet objet: mais quand l'objet est entièrement, absolument laid et plat, on est bien sûr alors que ce qu'on aime dans l'oeuvre d'art, c'est l'art tout seul. L'art pur, l'art suprême, n'existe que s'il s'exerce sur des laideurs et des platitudes. Et voilà pourquoi le naturalisme, loin d'être, comme quelques-uns le croient, un art grossier, est un art aristocratique, un art de mandarins égoïstes, le comble de l'art, -- ou de l'artificiel.'
- J. Lemaitre, Les Contemporains, 1ère série, 14th ed., 1890, p.317.
67. Valéry, 'Mauvaises pensées et autres', quoted by P. Hamon, 'Un discours contraint', Poétique, 16, 1973.
- Elsewhere, Valéry comments: 'Huysmans a préparé, sans s'en douter, la transmutation du naturalisme en symbolisme, conséquence fatale d'un travail de style poussé à l'extrême, d'une sorte de majoration systématique de l'expression. On arrive fatalement lorsqu'on cherche avec obstination à rendre le réel, à abuser des valeurs et des contrastes de mots. La rhétorique ultra-pittoresque, l'épithète de plus en plus forte ou lointaine, les images de plus en plus denses, et de plus en plus particulières, tout ceci finit par transformer la "vérité" follement poursuivie et lui substitue l'excitation poétique... Je veux dire que l'éclat et le jeu du langage deviennent le principal intérêt des oeuvres, aux dépens des choses représentées. Il n'y a pas loin de ce mode d'écrire à celui qu'avait conçu Mallarmé...'
- Quoted in F. Lefèvre, Entretiens sur J.-K. Huysmans, 1931, pp.39-41.
68. According to S. Ullmann, Manette Salomon is 'a novel in which even inanimate objects can be brought to life and endowed with human characteristics. The objects are seen as the real protagonists, they are in the forefront, and the human element is only incidentally mentioned and merely provides the background of the scene.'
- Style in the French Novel, quoted by Maria Elisabeth Kronegger, Literary Impressionism, New Haven, 1973, p.29.
69. 'Ce qui fait des Goncourt les précurseurs d'abord involontaires du naturalisme, c'est qu'ils se sont voulus dans leur oeuvre romanesque les "historiens des nerfs" et d'abord de leur nerfs: la surexcitation nerveuse et l'hypersensibilité jouent dans leur art un tel rôle, qu'ils croient très volontiers aux affirmations de quelques médecins de leur temps selon lesquelles le génie serait "une névrose": ils reconnaissent en tout cas que leur oeuvre "repose sur la maladie nerveuse".'
- E. Caramaschi, ed., Germinie Lacerteux, Naples/Paris, 1968, p.xix.

70. 'Ah! c'était par trop embêtant que de vivre ainsi! et les persécutions de sa chair la laisserent sans force; elle avait subitement des chaleurs dans les mains et aux tempes, l'oeil se brouillait par instants, quand, à l'atelier, ces paroles qui évoquent l'image s'échangeaient entre les ouvrières, puis, à force d'observer ce vigile jeûne de l'amour, les névralgies lui rompirent le crâne; en vain elle essaya de mouches d'opium sur le front, de perles de quinine, rien ne réussit à la soulager.' Les Soeurs Vatard. p.54.

71. 'Céline, la godaillieuse, une grande fille aux yeux clairs et aux cheveux couleur de paille, une solide gaillarde dont le sang fourmillait et dansait dans les veines, une grande mâtime qui avait couru aux hommes, dès les premiers frissons de sa puberté.' Ibid., p.17.

72. The Crès edition of Les Soeurs Vatard has twenty chapters; chapters two and eighteen are divided into two sections. The more recent 10/18 edition (Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975) does not have these subdivisions and therefore has twenty-two chapters.

73. J.-P. Vilcot, 'Huysmans et les autres: jeux d'écriture, jeux de massacre', RSH. 170-71, 1978, p.97.

74. Flaubert, Correspondance, 8e série, 1930, Feb.-March 1879, pp.224-5.

75. J. Dubois, introduction to L'Assommoir. (Garnier-Flammarion) 1969, p.21.

76. M. Cressot, 'La Langue de L'Assommoir'. Le Français moderne, 8, 1940, p.215.

77. 'La coexistence des deux tons produit même des effets bizarres quand les mots grossiers semblent plaqués sur une prose raffinée "fin de siècle":

"La pièce lugubre où cette paire de soûlards mettaient l'horreur blême de leur hébètement."

'On voit... à quel point Zola est engagé dans les recherches stylistiques de son époque. Il emploie paradoxalement dans une oeuvre naturaliste tous les procédés de l'écriture artiste de l'impressionnisme, y compris la préciosité du langage.'

J.-L. Vissière, 'L'Art de la phrase dans L'Assommoir'. Les Cahiers naturalistes. 11, 1958, p.461, p.462.

78. Cressot remarks: 'la vraie figure de la langue populaire et sans doute de tout parler réside dans des expressions et dans des métaphores plutôt que dans des mots.' Op. cit., p.210.

Vissière observes, however: 'à la lecture d'une page des Goncourt ou de Huysmans, même les mots vulgaires qui parsèment cette prose travaillée donnent une impression d'artificiel.' Op. cit., p.455.

79. Quoted in BSH, 57, 1971, pp.4-5.

On 27 January 1879, Huysmans tells Hannon his fellow-binders are displeased by Les Soeurs Vatard: 'on ne comprend pas que moi brocheur j'aie traîné dans la mélasse toutes les bonnes gouges de satineuses.'

80. 'Le spectateur s'efface devant le spectacle et, dans la ville dévoreuse, ce sont les objets qui sucent toute l'énergie dérobée aux êtres. (...) chez Huysmans, les temps forts du roman sont ces séries de descriptions vues, non par les personnages ni même en rapport à eux, mais par rapport à lui, l'écrivain, fasciné dans sa faiblesse par la ville prostituée.'

Marie-Claire Bancquart, 'Paris chez Huysmans: une totalité manquée', in Mélanges J. Lods, 1978, vol. 2, pp.755-56.

81. 'Une esthétique se révèle dans cette pensée... "que la tristesse des giroflées séchant dans un pot, lui paraissait plus intéressante que le sourire ensoleillé des roses", etc.

Pourquoi? Ni les giroflées, ni les roses, ne sont intéressantes par elles-mêmes, il n'y a d'intéressant que la manière de les peindre. Le Gange n'est pas plus poétique que la Bièvre, mais la Bièvre ne l'est pas plus que le Gange. Prenez garde, nous allons retomber, comme au temps de la tragédie classique, dans l'aristocratie des sujets et dans la préciosité des mots. On trouvera que les expressions canailles font bon effet dans le style, tout comme autrefois on vous l'enjolivait avec des termes choisis. La rhétorique est retournée, mais c'est toujours de la rhétorique.' Flaubert, Correspondance, op. cit., Feb.-March 1879, p.225. (To another correspondent, Flaubert simply describes Les Soeurs Vatard as 'abominable', 14 March 1879, p.231.)

Flaubert likewise considered Zola in L'Assommoir to be 'une précieuse à l'inverse'. (Quoted in P. Pia. Romanciers, poètes, essayistes du XIXe siècle. 1971, p.276.)

82. Huysmans' style 'can be considered a sort of violent seasoning, a peppery sauce without which the meat, the subject matter of his novels, would have been unendurably tasteless and unappetizing.' F.W.J. Hemmings, The Age of Realism, 1974, p.203.

83. 'Le réel est réputé se suffire à lui-même... il est assez fort pour démentir toute idée de "fonction"... son énonciation n'a nul besoin d'être intégré dans une structure... l'avoir-été-là des choses est un principe suffisant de la parole.'

Concrete details 'ne disent finalement rien d'autre que ceci: nous sommes le réel; c'est la catégorie du "réel" (...) qui est alors signifiée; autrement dit, la carence même du signifié au profit du seul référent devient le signifiant même du réalisme: il se produit un effet de réel...'

R. Barthes, 'L'Effet de réel', Communications, 11, 1968, p.88.

84. Observing that Flaubert reworked a description of Rouen in Madame Bovary six times, Barthes comments: 'le tissu descriptif, qui semble à première vue accorder une grande importance (par sa dimension, le soin de son détail) à l'objet Rouen n'est en fait qu'une sorte de fond destiné à recevoir les joyaux de quelques métaphores rares, l'excipient neutre, prosaïque, qui enrobe la précieuse substance symbolique, comme si, dans Rouen, importaient seules les figures de rhétorique auxquelles la vue de la ville se prête...' Ibid., p.86.

85. L. Bersani, Balzac to Beckett. New York, 1970, p.157.

86. Ibid., p.182.

87. Ibid., p.184.

88. E. Hennequin, Quelques écrivains français. 1890, p.194.

89. C.A. Burns, preface to Une belle journée. Geneva, 1970, p.xiii.

In a similar way, J.H. Matthews in 'Things in the Naturalist Novel' (French Studies, 14, 1960) takes the view that description of objects is principally an 'oblique method of characterization' (p.213). This is certainly true up to a point; an excellent example might be Maupassant's story 'Qui sait?', where the narrator, an eccentric recluse, has protected and projected his identity in the furnishings and objets d'art of his house, only to have the security of both home and self exploded when all the objects in the house suddenly take on a life of their own and rush out into the outside world, abandoning him. But this case again suggests the limitations of simply subordinating description to character as a sort of version of the pathetic fallacy writ large. On the contrary, here it is the subject which has surrendered to the world and its objects, to the haunting terrors of outside forces.

90. Une belle journée, p.xv.

91. As Deffoux and Zavie remark in Le Groupe de Médan (1920), 'il pleut beaucoup dans les romans naturalistes' (p.16). Partly because, perhaps, the naturalists 'eurent l'ivresse de l'écriture triste' (p.150); but mainly because the rainstorm seems to have become a descriptive commonplace, with authors striving to outdo one another in impressionistic effects, as the anthology of such setpieces in Deffoux's Le Naturalisme (1929) shows.

92. 'Il est fâcheux d'abord que nous n'ayons pu changer ce mot "roman", qui ne signifie plus rien, appliqué à nos oeuvres naturalistes. Ce mot entraîne une idée de conte, d'affabulation, de fantaisie, qui jure singulièrement avec les procès-verbaux que nous dressons.' Zola, 'Du roman', Le Roman expérimental, X, 1297.

93. 'Si l'Assommoir et la Terre sont si sombres, c'est que Zola ne sait comment faire vivre ses hommes et ses femmes sur leurs mobiles intérieurs normaux, et est obligé pour avoir une histoire à raconter de mettre à l'intérieur de ses marionnettes le ressort du crime.' D. Saurat, 'Émile Zola', Les Marges, 9, 1930, p.16.

94. F. Gaillard, 'Quelques remarques sur la temporalité dans le roman naturaliste', RSN, 160, 1975, p.555.

95. Unsuccessfully trying to finish a watercolour, Jules de Goncourt wrote a description of what he was trying to paint. 'And this highly significant transposition marks not only the inception of the Goncourts' literary career but the explanation of their literary method. It is (...) an essentially plastic and chromatic approach to the use of words, and it leads to the cult of the word picture at the expense of narrative or argument or even continuity.' Anita Brookner, The Genius of the Future. London/New York, 1971, p.126.

The abbé Mugnier describes Huysmans' recording of minutiae in a notebook as a constant preoccupation and activity. See F. Lefèvre, op. cit., pp.51-52.

96. According to M.E. Kronegger, 'The perceived world for the impressionists is neither a sum of objects, the solid reality of matter, the brute reality of an inhuman world divorced from the subject, in the tradition of realists and naturalists, nor is it a symbol of a hidden reality, a representation of both idea and the unseen, the embodiment and revelation of the infinite, in the tradition of symbolist writers.' For the impressionists 'Reality is a synthesis of pure sensations, modulated by consciousness and changed into impressions.' Op. cit., p.36.

For Ruth Moser, 'L'impressionnisme traduit en peinture des sensations de tout ordre, sensations de couleurs, de formes, de luminosité, d'ombre, mais aussi de fraîcheur, d'humidité, de chaleur ou de froid.' L'Impressionnisme français. Geneva/Lille, 1952, p.60.

97. H.A. Hatzfeld, 'Discussion sur le naturalisme français', Studies in Philology. 39, Oct. 1942, p.726.

98. H.A. Hatzfeld, Literature through Art. New York, 1952, p.170.

99. 'La qualité sensible est devenue un absolu qui se détache de son support, de l'objet, pour mener une vie indépendante, toute souveraine.' R. Moser, op. cit., p.103.

100. A. Buisine, op. cit.

101. F. Gaillard, op. cit., p.563.

102. Ibid., p.564.

103. In Les Rougon-Macquart. 'Le roman se situe presque hors du temps historique, dans le monde du "longtemps", du "déjà". Zola arrive à allonger la durée, à faire sentir le poids de l'instant et de l'attente jusqu'à une sorte de vertige, ou à donner, par une composition cyclique et des reprises, l'impression d'un éternel recommencement de toutes choses.' C. Becker, op. cit., p.124.

104. J. Onimus, 'L'Expression du temps dans le roman contemporain', Revue de littérature comparée. 3, July-Sept. 1954, p.299.

105. J. Dubois, Romanciers français de l'instantané au XIXe siècle. Brussels, 1963, p.22.

106. Ibid., p.22.

107. Letter of 8 July 1888, quoted in BSH. 57, 1971, p.9.

108. According to D.A. Williams, L'Éducation sentimentale deliberately dedramatizes Balzacian themes, both in terms of character (Frédéric's lack of energy) or event (the grotesque duel scene), and 'there is no suggestion of some larger cosmic drama which would heighten the significance of the events recorded.' The Monster in the Mirror. 1978, p.83.

109. 'Aux environs de 1880, se précise (...) une sorte de Jansénisme de l'Art; un rêve hante les cerveaux créateurs, le rêve d'une perfection aride, ascétique: l'idée d'un roman où il ne se passerait rien, où il n'arriverait rien, d'une oeuvre blanche qui ne s'accommoderait

même plus du nom de roman et ne se soumettrait à aucune des catégories traditionnelles...' A. Vial, Guy de Maupassant et l'art du roman. 1954, p.32.

110. Une belle journée. p.338.

111. F. Boissin, 'Romans, contes et nouvelles', Polybiblion littéraire. 12, 1880.

112. In the Goncourts' novels, 'La vie intérieure du personnage se pulvérise en de menues sensations qui forment une nuée flottante entre l'univers extérieur et le moi profond du héros.' R. Ricatte, op. cit., p.458.

113. F.W.J. Hemmings, The Age of Realism. 1974, p.204.

114. F. Brunetiere, Le Roman naturaliste. 1896.
J. Barbey d'Aurevilly, Le Roman contemporain. 1902.

115. J. Sanger, 'A propos des Soeurs Vatard: approche socio-linguistique', BSH, 62, 1974, p.23.

116. In Soeur Philomène (1861), the Goncourts see class barriers in even more rigid terms. The orphan Marie Gaucher is brought up in a bourgeois household where her aunt is a servant and acquires a 'sensibilité supérieure' to her class. Her aunt 'se prenait à adorer presque respectueusement la petite comme un enfant d'un autre sang que le sien, et né pour une autre position que la sienne'; the society of servants is 'un monde à lever le coeur'. (Quoted from Flammarion/Fasquelle edition, 1922, p.74, pp.15-16, p.69.)

117. 'L'écrivain a toujours refusé de se laisser enrégimenter, de s'enfermer dans une doctrine ou une école. (...) Il refuse, de même, de se plier à un style, qu'il soit "naturaliste" ou "artiste".' L. Forestier, introduction to Maupassant, Contes et nouvelles. (Pléiade) 1974, I,xxx.

118. Baudelaire, Mon coeur mis à nu, Oeuvres complètes. ('L'Intégrale') 1968, p.637.

119. See also J. Borie, Le Célibataire français. 1976.

120. A situation similar to that between Berthe, André and Cyprien in En ménage. In Bel-Ami, the ménage of Duroy and Madeleine reveals the 'lutte intime de deux êtres qui, vivant côte à côte, s'ignorent toujours, se soupçonnent, se flairent, se guettent, mais ne se connaissent pas jusqu'au fond vaseux de l'âme.' Maupassant, Romans. (Albin Michel) 1975, p.503.

121. M.G. Lerner, Maupassant. 1975, pp.164-65.

122. Commenting on Duroy, J. Borie notes 'l'étrange passivité de ce séducteur qui se laisse choisir plutôt qu'il ne choisit, qui ne peut rentrer en rapport avec les hommes que par le vol de leurs femmes, qui maintient avec celles-ci des relations ambiguës dont la brutalité apparente cache mal l'abjecte dépendance ou elles le maintiennent.' Op. cit., p.52.

123. Maupassant, Contes et nouvelles. (Pléiade) 1979, II, 765.

R.-P. Colin comments on Maupassant: 'L'érotisme de l'écrivain côtoie constamment le remords: l'acte sexuel n'est jamais qu'une chute, une soumission aux instincts. Seul l'intellect peut racheter cette dégradation, non point en bridant les élans, mais en en prolongeant au contraire l'agrément par la recherche de moyens que la nature ne connaît pas.'

En revanche, dans la fécondation, la grossesse ou l'accouchement, le romancier décèle l'horreur d'une connivence avec la Volonté... But Maupassant respects the woman who has escaped 'cette fatalité biologique pour n'être plus qu'un instrument d'amour raffiné, ou même dans le meilleur des cas, une complice perverse.' Op. cit., pp. 199 & 201.

124. Huysmans writes to Hannon on 23 August 1877: 'l'on dira que nous méprisons les femmes! quand nous passons notre temps à penser à elles et à essayer de les reproduire!' Nearly all the Goncourts' novels, of course, are about women, as the titles show.

125. Living together, translated by J.W.G. Sandiford-Pellé, (Fortune Press) 1969.

126. Alexis' story 'Le Collage' (1883) owes a lot to En ménage. A more famous study of a 'collage' and its destructive outcome is Alphonse Daudet's novel Sapho (1884).

127. 'Un roman expérimental, La Cousine Bette par exemple, est simplement le procès-verbal de l'expérience, que le romancier répète sous les yeux du public.' Zola, 'Le Roman expérimental', X, 1179.

128. Writing to Goncourt about La Maison d'un artiste, Huysmans observes 'un intimisme délicieux qui émeut et fait passer un doux frisson, à la lecture de certaines pages.' And in depression he prefers Goncourt's novels, 'car, seuls, ils dégagent les intimes mélancolies de l'existence.' Lettres inédites à Edmond de Goncourt, 1956 15 March 1881, p.66, p.68.

129. 'Un des grands défauts des livres de M. Huysmans, c'est, selon moi, le type unique qui tient la corde dans chacune de ses oeuvres... Et très évidemment cette personne est M. Huysmans, cela se sent...' 'J.-K. Huysmans', in En marge, 1927, p.57.

130. He writes to Hannon on 12 November 1877: 'J'ai avec cela des embêtements de femme, une ancienne et charmante amie d'ailleurs, ouvrière modiste qui s'est mise à ma piste pour me retrouver - ce qui m'embête fort - car je n'ai plus le temps et les illusions nécessaires pour refiler le parfait amour - Ma chandelle est morte, il me faut des souffles frangipanes de femmes plus que perverses pour la rallumer!' But by 20 November, he has succumbed: 'enfin - j'y ai au moins gagné quelques jolis coins que je ferai un de ces jours, ça me donnera quelques bonnes pages que j'entreprendrai et vous enverrai dès que je serai sorti des filles Vatarde.'

See also R. Baldick, La Vie de J.-K. Huysmans, part one, chapter seven, 'Le Pessimiste'.

131. C. Jenkins sees Flaubert's ironic undermining of Frédéric as being ultimately self-indulgent -- because he is in a sense ironising himself. 'Flaubert' in French Literature and its Background: the late 19th century, ed. J. Cruickshank, 1975.

132. 'Le héros naturaliste est veule: il subit la vie; il se laisse glisser dans la dégradation, dans l'alcoolisme, dans la prostitution, dans la saleté, dans l'oisiveté; il n'essaie pas de prendre en main son destin, ou, s'il essaie, comme la Gervaise de l'Assommoir, honnête et brave au début du roman, les circonstances extérieures ont vite raison de ces velléités.' Micheline Tison-Braun, La Crise de l'humanisme. 1958, vol. 1, p.14.

133. E. Coppelio, 'La Vie bête', Gil Blas, 2 April 1881.

134. E. de Goncourt, Journal, 27 Feb. 1881, XII,105.

135. 'Chouya a derrière lui plusieurs volumes: le Crachoir, Joséphine, les Soeurs Lionnet. (...)

Dans tout le roman des Soeurs Lionnet, on n'a vu que les fameuses "crottes de chien", qui se trouvaient aux 2e, 3e, 5e, 6e, 15e, 21e, 33e, 62e, 102e, 147e, et 211e pages. Pas un critique n'est allé plus loin, et tous se sont répétés. (...)

Voici En omnibus, la dernière oeuvre du jeune romancier.'

As for Zola: 'Physiquement, il a trouvé la quadrature du cercle: c'est sa tête, un fromage de Hollande incrusté dans une pierre de taille.'

A. Scholl, 'Chouya et Boulou', L'Événement, 17 April 1881.

136. O.R. Morgan, 'Léon Hennique and the disintegration of Naturalism', Nottingham French Studies, I, 2, Oct. 1962, p.27.

137. L. Hennique, Deux nouvelles, Brussels, 1881, p.49.

138. 'Il attendait la tête de son bothriocéphale, le front vide, l'oeil fiévreux. Telles, après un gros temps, lorsque la houle moutonne encore, les femmes de pêcheurs consultent l'horizon.' Ibid., p.131.

139. M. Tournier, Le Vent Paraclet, 1977, p.257.

140. 'Les rares repas de qualité peints dans l'oeuvre de Huysmans (dans En Ménage et La-Bas) ont tous en commun la présence discrète et attentive d'une femme qui sait apprêter les mets et le caractère d'abri des lieux où on les consomme.' R.-P. Colin, 'Huysmans et les saluts du "vieux garçon"', in La Femme au XIXe siècle, ed. R. Bellet, Lyon, 1978, p.115.

141. A. Breton, Anthologie de l'humour noir, 1940.

J.H. Matthews notes that 'the Naturalists seem to have shared a gift for perceiving an inverted poetry, a poésie noire, bearing the same relationship to poetry as André Breton's humour noir to humour.' Op. cit., p.212.

142. P. Hamon, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une description?', Poétique, 12, 1972, p.467.

143. '...Vous verriez dans Stendhal un certain sentiment de l'altitude se liant à la vie spirituelle: le lieu élevé où Julien Sorel est prisonnier, la tour au haut de laquelle est enfermé Fabrice, le clocher où l'abbé Blanès s'occupe d'astrologie et d'où Fabrice jette un si beau coup d'oeil.' Proust, La Prisonnière, quoted in Stendhal, Romans. ('L'Intégrale') 1969, I,301, n.92.

In the opening chapter of La Curée, a description of the Bois de Boulogne is bluntly followed by the statement that Renée looks at this scene 'sans voir'.

144. Explorations comparable perhaps to those of Baudelaire's 'flâneur' who 'goes botanizing on the asphalt'. (W. Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism. 1973, p.36.)

145. 'Un mobilier lui était ami ou ennemi. Un vilain verre le dégoûtait d'un bon vin. Une nuance, une forme, la couleur d'un papier, l'étoffe d'un meuble le touchaient agréablement ou désagréablement, et faisaient passer les dispositions de son humeur par les mille modulations de ses impressions.' Charles Demailly, quoted in Joan Yvonne Dangelzer, La Description du milieu dans le roman français de Balzac à Zola. 1938, p.9.

146. H. Juin, preface to En ménage/A vau-l'eau. (Union Générale d'Éditions) 1975, p.14.

147. These schoolday miseries might be compared with the picture given in Valles's L'Enfant. And like Vingtras in Le Bachelier, André concludes that his diploma makes him unemployable (En ménage.p.301)

148. Baudelaire, op. cit., p.277.

149. A. Thérive, 'En ménage'. Vient de paraître. Nov. 1928, p.406.

150. Though Maupassant may reject the 'will-to-live', he does commune with nature in some ways -- as the opening pages of the story 'Amour' brilliantly reveal, where the communion of blood between the hunter and his prey is described in semi-mystical terms.

151. V. Brombert, 'Huysmans et la thébaïde raffinée', Critique. 30, Nov. 1974. J.-P. Vilcot, 'Bonheur et clôture chez Huysmans', BSH, 63, 1975.

152. See note 66 above.

153. This usage is perhaps little more than a cliché; talking of a character's illness, Alexis tells us 'aucun rouage de la machine n'était détraqué...' Madame Meuriot. 1891, p.245.

154. 'Le bourgeois, c'est à la fois le matérialiste qui ne vit que pour son confort et que n'anime aucune illusion généreuse, et la victime des tabous sociaux, tour à tour animal de proie, exploiteur des pauvres et médiocre conformiste.' M. Tison-Braun, op. cit., p.79.

155. 'Le génie forme avec le célibat et la maladie une trinité. Ainsi, accepter la vie conjugale, c'est accepter l'abêtissement, mais aussi recouvrer la santé, d'où la leçon d'En Ménage.' R.-P. Colin, 'Huysmans et les saluts du "vieux garçon"', op. cit., p.116.

156. D. Roche, 'L'Écriture d'En Ménage'. BSH. 70, 1979, p.54.

157. Ibid., p.48.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. 'Most civil servants were not grand. Their salaries ceased to be impressive and in 1901 articles were published lamenting their fate as a new proletariat. The average salary in 1900 was only 1,490 francs, hardly equal to that of a good labourer.' T. Zeldin, France 1848-1945, I: Ambition. Love and Politics. 1973, p.122.

In 1876, 5 per cent of the active population were employés; in 1911, 9.3 per cent. 'La plupart (des fonctionnaires) sont issus des masses populaires, et beaucoup, restant au bas de l'échelle, ne s'en dégageront jamais tout à fait. Les petits fonctionnaires sont, en effet, mal payés...' G. Dupeux, La Société française 1789-1960. 1964, p.169, p.174.

2. The earliest known drafts of Sac au dos, entitled 'Le Chant du départ' and 'La Léproserie' are in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert 1. Cf. P. Waldner, 'Huysmans et la guerre de 1870', in Colloque de la société d'histoire littéraire de la France. 1972, p.44 n.41 and R. Baldick, La Vie de J.-K. Huysmans. 1958, p.41, p.45.

3. L. Descaves in Huysmans, Oeuvres complètes. V, 233. P. Cogny, review of M. Bougran in Les Cahiers naturalistes. 29, 1965, pp.81-83.

4. A. Pagès, 'Le Mythe de Médan', Les Cahiers naturalistes. 55, 1981, p.40.

5. R. Dumesnil, La Publication des 'Soirées de Médan'. 1933, p.28.

6. C. Charle, La Crise littéraire à l'époque du naturalisme. 1979, p.66.

7. J. Richepin, Gil Blas, 21 April 1880, quoted in R. Dumesnil, op. cit., p.176.

8. Huysmans, Lettres inédites à Arid Prins. Geneva, 1977, 23 February 1888, p.112.

9. E. Henriot, Réalistes et naturalistes. 1954, p.283.

10. Ibid., p.288. Henriot adds: 'Pour l'observation naturaliste, ce détail: du sommet de l'Arc de Triomphe, le général de Céard voit à la lunette sa maîtresse passer la Seine en barque, aux avant-postes, sous Saint-Cloud! (...) Après la bataille, de Paul Alexis, n'est pas moins théâtral et moins faux.' As for the group as a whole: 'Parce qu'ils peignaient l'exceptionnel, ils se croyaient des cliniciens; parce qu'ils avaient l'oeil grossissant, ils se prenaient pour des observateurs; pour des esprits indépendants, parce qu'ils montraient des choses laides; et pour des savants, parce qu'ils annonçaient gravement des poncifs au nom d'un système.' (pp.288-89)

11. According to Flaubert: 'Boule de suif écrase le volume dont le titre est stupide'. (Letter to Maupassant, April 1880, quoted in Maupassant, Contes et nouvelles. I, (Pléiade) 1974, p.1297.)

12. To H. Alis, 2 October 1882, Fonds Lambert 45.

13. Previously, 'Le sujet avait servi presque uniquement à exalter l'armée, la Revanche, et à prêcher la haine patriotique. Il peut servir maintenant à dénoncer la société qui autorise et sanctifie cette absurde monstruosité, la guerre.' C. Digeon, La Crise allemande de la pensée française, 1959, pp.266-67.

14. See A.C. Long, 'Le Rôle de la guerre de 1870 dans seize contes de Maupassant et Les Soirées de Médan', M.A. thesis, Exeter University, 1977, p.4, p.15.

15. Digeon, op. cit., p.266.

16. 'Toute la première partie au moins de l'oeuvre de Zola atteste la permanence du rêve d'une idylle au sein de la nature (...) Toutes ces tentatives avortent et tournent mal...' J. Borie, Zola et les mythes, 1971, pp.208-09.

17. See R. Dumesnil, op. cit.

18. Quoted by L. Descaves in Huysmans, Oeuvres complètes, I, 251.

19. L. Bloy, La Femme pauvre, Oeuvres, VII, 1972, p.148.

The quotation from Bloy at the head of this chapter is from 'Les Dernières Colonnes de l'Eglise', Oeuvres, IV, 1965, p.260. In 'Les Funérailles du naturalisme', Bloy observes: 'Comme tant d'autres hélas! qui n'en sont pas revenus, j'ai pris part à cette guerre fameuse, inexpiable, où les marcassins de l'Allemagne foulèrent aux pieds la plus généreuse contrée de l'Occident.' (Oeuvres, IV, 106.)

20. C. Chassé remarks of Huysmans' 'physiological style': 'Parfois la scatologie se mêle à ces impressions gustatives, car les diverses phases de la digestion et surtout les plus répugnantes l'intéressent au moins autant que l'absorption des mets. Il se penche avec délices sur les déjections des diarrhéiques à l'hôpital.' Styles et physiologie, 1928, p.140.

21. Lettres inédites à Camille Lemonnier, Geneva/Paris, 1957, August 1877, p.43.

22. P. Cogny, ed., Le Huysmans intime de Henry Céard et Jean de Caldain, 1957, p.159. Both versions of Sac au dos are printed in volume one of the Oeuvres complètes, from which all references are given.

23. M. Cressot, 'Les Deux Versions de Sac au dos', Annales Universitatis Saraviensis, III, 1/2, 1954, p.35.

24. 'Loin de renforcer en particulier la note antimilitariste et antipatriotique, Huysmans aurait plutôt tendance à l'atténuer en 1880.' P. Waldner, op. cit., p.43 n.40.

25. 'L'idée directrice du livre: la France de Napoléon III s'est trompée de guerre, elle a pris pour une aventure -- refrains de goguette, troupiers de tradition, mythologie de la valeur nationale, improvisation permanente -- une guerre qui, en fait, était la

manifestation d'une loi de la nature et correspondait à la nécessité scientifique de la lutte vitale mise en lumière par Darwin.' R.A. Jouanny, introduction to La Débâcle. (Garnier-Flammarion) 1975, p.16.

26. See for example A. Horne, The Fall of Paris: the Siege and the Commune. (Penguin) 1981.

27. P. Waldner, op. cit., p.40. As Waldner observes, Huysmans lacks the epic imagination necessary to present war or crisis: 'toute création pour lui est d'abord un témoignage que conditionne l'expérience la plus étroitement personnelle.' (p.34) It is significant that La Faim was never completed: despite his documentation, Huysmans lacked the personal experience of having lived through the Siege of Paris.

According to P. Cogny, 'La Faim n'était (...) pas seulement pour Huysmans une contribution à l'histoire du siège de Paris, vu sous de petits aspects, plus significatifs dans leur sordidité "vériste" que les récits héroïques à la Daudet, c'était le témoignage d'une victime aimée dont la déchéance personnelle s'inscrivait dans le désastre national.' 'Un projet avorté de roman: La Faim de J.-K. Huysmans', RHLF, Sept.-Oct. 1979, pp.836-37.

28. Quoted in R. Baldick, op. cit., p.86.

29. Croquis parisiens, pp.121-24.

30. Cf. note 1 above. Folantin in fact earns 237 francs 40 a month, that is 3,000 francs a year (including deductions). This was Huysmans' own salary in 1880; in 1882 he earned 3,300 francs; by 1895, he was earning 6,000 francs. Both author and character are then considerably better paid than the functionaries cited by Dupeux and Zeldin. See M. de Pradel de Lamase, 'Le Sous-chef J.-K. Huysmans', BSH, 18, 1939 and D.G. 'Huysmans Charles, Georges (extraits d'archives)', 33-44, 7, Autumn 1980.

Roughly contemporary treatments of the 'petit fonctionnaire' can be found in Maupassant's 'Les Dimanches d'un bourgeois de Paris' and 'En famille' (1880 and 1881), Rod's La Chute de Miss Topsy (1882), and Courteline's Messieurs les ronds-de-cuir (1891-92).

31. 'La vision excrémentielle est... expression de l'instinct de mort: et c'est justement ce que Gilles Deleuze appelle, chez Zola, la fêlure.' J. Borie, op. cit., p.27.

32. 'Je retrouve dans Huysmans le mot "chipoter", employé couramment par ma grand-mère: "Tu chipotes au lieu de manger". Je n'entends plus jamais prononcer ce mot. Le manque d'appétit aurait-il disparu provisoirement des mœurs...?' Lise Deharme, 'Huysmans et la cuisine', in CTSJ, 8, 1963, p.52.

33. C.G. Shenton, 'A vau-l'eau: a naturalist sotie', Modern Language Review, 72, April 1977, p.306.

34. J.-P. Richard, 'Le Texte et sa cuisine', Microlectures, 1979, p.135. See also: I. Gotta, ed., A vau-l'eau. Rome, 1956; Margot Kruse, 'A vau-l'eau von Huysmans', in Festschrift für W. Pabst, Berlin, 1972; E.D. Rossmann, 'The Conflict over food in the work of Huysmans', Nineteenth Century French Studies.

II, 1/2, Fall-Winter 1973-74; A. Winner, 'The Indigestible Reality: A vau-l'eau'. Virginia Quarterly Review. 50, Winter 1974.

35. M. Issacharoff, L'Espace et la nouvelle. 1976, p.64. Huysmans complains of 'des sorbets d'immondices' in a letter to Hannon of 27 January 1879.

36. J.-P. Richard, op. cit., p.140, p.143.

37. The 10/18 edition of A vau-l'eau gives 'forge' instead of 'gorge'. (Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975, p.409.)

38. J.-P. Richard, op. cit., p.139.

39. M. Issacharoff, op. cit., p.64.

40. 'Le feu enfermé dans le foyer fut sans doute pour l'homme le premier sujet de rêverie, le symbole du repos, l'invitation au repos.' G. Bachelard, La Psychanalyse du feu, 1978 (1949), p.32.

41. J.-P. Richard, op. cit., p.140.

42. M. Issacharoff, op. cit., p.67.

43. '...il comprit l'inutilité des changements de routes, la stérilité des élans et des efforts; il faut se laisser aller à vau-l'eau; Schopenhauer a raison, se dit-il, "la vie de l'homme oscille comme un pendule entre la douleur et l'ennui." Aussi n'est-ce point la peine de tenter d'accélérer ou de retarder la marche du balancier; il n'y a qu'à se croiser les bras et à tâcher de dormir...' A vau-l'eau. pp.84-85.

44. V. Brombert, 'Huysmans et la thébaïde raffinée', Critique. 30, Nov. 1974, p.992.

45. Ibid., p.977.

46. A sense of fatality hangs over the protagonist of A vau-l'eau: 'la guigne ne le lâchait point' (p.11); 'il ne fallait compter sur aucune clémence du sort, sur aucune justice de la destinée' (p.13); 'il avait pu, tout à son aise, réfléchir sur la bonté d'une Providence qui donne argent, honneur, santé, femme, tout aux uns et rien aux autres' (p.18). This sense may be illustrated by an image taken from Christianity ('(il) se mit à parcourir le chemin de croix de ses quarante ans, s'arrêtant, désespéré, à chaque station', p.11), but no religious belief is implied.

47. C.G. Shenton, op. cit., p.307.

48. 'Huysmans est un écrivain qui voudrait dévorer, jouir, et qui sait en même temps son impuissance à le faire. Ce n'est même plus le gros repas de Flaubert, minutieusement décrit, mais toujours à recommencer, parce qu'il ne donne jamais la sensation du rassasiement. C'est, d'emblée, la nourriture convoitée qui est frelatée, répugnante, mais toujours et désespérément cherchée. Le manque d'intégration est immédiat.' Marie-Claire Bancquart, 'Paris chez Huysmans: une totalité manquée', in Mélanges J. Lods. 1978, vol. 2, p.749.

49. C.G. Shenton, op. cit., p.303, p.308.
50. R. de Gourmont, 'Huysmans et la cuisine', Mercure de France, 1 October 1910.
51. See J. Boris, Le Célibataire français, 1976 and T. Zeldin, op. cit., ch. eleven, 'Marriage and morals'.
52. P. Guiral and G. Thuillier, La Vie quotidienne des domestiques au XIXe siècle, 1978, p.198.
53. Up to 1914, an employer could dismiss a married servant who became pregnant; and 'vers 1900 la moitié des prostituées sont des servantes qui ont mal tourné'. Ibid., p.148, p.132.
54. Quoted in R. Baldick, op. cit., p.121.
55. M. Tison-Braun, La Crise de l'humanisme, vol. 1, 1958, p.79.
56. H.R.T. Brandreth, Huysmans, 1963, p.41. G.R. Ridge, Huysmans, New York, 1968, p.70.
57. P. Cogny, J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité, 1953, p.33.
58. See note 129 to chapter two.
59. In 'Damiens', Croquis parisiens, the experience of visiting a prostitute is seen as a form of torture: 'Et, en effet, n'avais-je pas moralement enduré un supplice identique à celui qui tortura le corps du régicide?
N'avais-je pas été, moi aussi, tiré, cahoté, sur une idéale Grève, par quatre réflexions diverses; écartelé en quelque sorte: -- d'abord par une pensée de basse concupiscence; -- puis par une désillusion immédiate du désir dès l'entrée dans cette chambre; -- ensuite par le pénitentiel regret de l'argent versé; -- enfin par cette expiatoire détresse que laissent, une fois commis, les frauduleux forfaits des sens.' (Croquis parisiens, p.119.)
60. According to Marina Warner, 'in the very celebration of the perfect human woman, both humanity and women (are) subtly denigrated'. Alone of all her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary, 1976, p.xxi.
61. 'L'Étiage' in Croquis parisiens contains an exuberant description of a large number of breasts.
62. See for example, P. Alexis, Trente romans, 1895.
63. See note 27 above.
64. 'J'ai quitté, pour l'instant, le Gros-Caillois, qui ne marchait pas comme je voulais et que je reprendrai lorsque je serai dans un autre état d'esprit. J'avais positivement besoin de me remettre au vert dans une noire et furieuse fantaisie, toquée mais tout de même réelle.' Lettres inédites à Émile Zola, Geneva/Lille, 1953, c. 15 November 1882, p.90.
65. See M. Garçon, preface to La Retraite de M. Bougran, (Pauvert) 1964. Huysmans writes to Odilon Redon on 5 June 1888: 'vous me

parlez dans votre épistole d'une visite de la bonne Edith Huyber, je l'ai vue également, mais entre nous deux ici, si cette brave fille nous est dévouée, et j'en suis sûr, il n'en est pas de même de l'horrible Quilter, le rédacteur en chef de l'Universal Review. C'est un imbécile absolu, il y a toute chance pour qu'il refuse et vos dessins et ma prose, comme il vient de me refuser une nouvelle, parce qu'il n'y était pas question d'amour pur. Vous voyez ça! Lettres... à Odilon Redon, 1960, p.114.

66. Anne-Marie Bijaoui-Baron, 'Les Retraites de M. Huysmans', BSH, 71, 1980, p.11, p.14.

67. Bouvard et Pécuchet was published posthumously in 1881.

68. Bijaoui-Baron, op. cit., p.12.

69. 'Ici, s'adressant au sommet des hiérarchies, c'était l'assurance "de la haute considération", puis la considération baissait de plusieurs crans, devenait, pour les gens n'ayant pas rang de Ministre, "la plus distinguée, la très distinguée, la distinguée, la parfaite", pour aboutir à la considération sans épithète, à celle qui se niait elle-même, car elle représentait simplement le comble du mépris.' M. Bougran p.37.

70. 'Tout dans la nouvelle comme dans l'anecdote tend vers la conclusion. La nouvelle doit s'élancer avec impétuosité, tel un projectile jeté d'un avion, pour frapper de sa pointe et avec toutes ses forces l'objectif visé.' Eikenbaum, quoted by Issacharoff, op. cit., p.9.

(Note: The quotation by Huysmans at the head of this chapter is cited by Rachilde in Le Souvenir de J.-K. Huysmans, Le Divan, May 1927, p.237.)

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Remy de Gourmont, Le Livre des Masques, 1963, p.114.
2. M. Raimond, La Crise du roman, 1966, p.83.
3. 'Détruisons une légende: le symbolisme n'est pas plus une réaction contre le Parnasse qu'il ne l'est contre le naturalisme. Ils coexistent, au prix de divergences; tous trois sont simultanés d'abord. Le temps servira de révélateur. Entre eux, il y a des points de contact, sinon d'union.' R. Pouilliant, Le Romantisme III 1869-1896, 1968, p.8.
See also J. Pierrot, L'Imaginaire décadent, 1977.
4. M. Raimond, op. cit., p.40.
5. H.A. Hatzfeld, 'Discussion sur le naturalisme français', Studies in Philology, 39, October 1942, p.704.
6. M. Fumaroli, ed., A rebours, (Gallimard, Folio) 1977, p.9.
7. Baudelaire, Curiosités esthétiques, (Garnier) 1962, p.103.
8. Lettres inédites à Émile Zola, Geneva/Lille, 1953, p.104.
9. Ibid. Following A rebours, Mallarmé published his 'Prose pour des Esseintes' in 1885, but the dedication to Huysmans' hero 'was really an afterthought; the admirer Mallarmé thought of when he originally began the poem (long before Huysmans' book) was undoubtedly the theoretical ideal reader, "tel autre".' (R.G. Cohn, Toward the Poems of Mallarmé, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1980, p.256 n.2.)
10. 'Nous n'avons aucune idée commune, en somme, pas plus en peinture qu'en littérature!' Letter published in J.-L. Lequesne, Lecture d'A Rebours, Plurielle, 4, 1974-75.
11. Lettres à Zola, p.104.
12. J. Barbey d'Aurevilly, Le Constitutionnel, 28 July 1884.
L. Bloy, 'Les Représailles du Sphinx', Le Chat noir, 14 June 1884.
13. R. Pouilliant, op. cit., p.141.
14. See for instance the case noted by Fumaroli, op. cit., pp. 404-05 n.28.
15. 'All through the book runs, like a red thread, a constant vein of parody.' G.L. Van Roosbroeck, The Legend of the Decadents, Columbia, 1927, p.42. See also G.A. Cevasco, 'Satirical and parodical interpretations of J.-K. Huysmans' A rebours', Romance Notes, 16, 1974-75.
16. D. Grojnowski, 'A rebours (...) de J.-K. Huysmans', Littérature, 29, February 1978, p.83.

17. In the preface to the second edition of Thérèse Raquin, Zola writes: 'J'ai choisi des personnages souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, entraînées à chaque acte de leur vie par les fatalités de leur chair' (I,519). The opening pages of A rebours suggest a similar fatality of the flesh: thus in one of des Esseintes's ancestors 'Déjà (...) les vices d'un tempérament appauvri, la prédominance de la lymphe dans le sang, apparaissaient' (p.2).

18. D. Grojnowski, op. cit., p.84.

19. 'Primitive man, Peter Caws explains in a shrewd account of structuralist thinking, "is in the fortunate position of not knowing that he has a self, and therefore of not being worried about it. And the structuralists have come to the conclusion that he is nearer the truth than we are, and that a good deal of our trouble arises out of the invention of the self as an object of study, from the belief that man has a special kind of being, in short from the emergence of humanism. Structuralism is not a humanism, because it refuses to grant man any special status in the world."' P. Caws, 'What is Structuralism?', Partisan Review, 35, 1968, quoted in D. Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing, 1979, p.62.

See also J.D. Culler, Structuralist Poetics, 1975, p.28.

20. D. Grojnowski, op. cit., p.86.

21. Paintings fill in des Esseintes's days, p.93. Similarly, the death of his plants creates a disturbing absence, p.152. In chapter eleven, he desires to escape the 'épuisantes débauches de l'esprit s'étourdissant à moudre à vide', p.192. In chapter thirteen, 'il lui semblait être sous une cloche pneumatique où le vide se faisait à mesure', p.251.

22. J. Lorrain, Contes d'un buveur d'éther, Verviers, 1975.

'Jean Lorrain notamment pourrait passer comme le représentant le plus accompli de la décadence, dans son style de vie comme dans son oeuvre, qui, sous un certain aspect, constitue une vulgarisation des thèmes d'A rebours, mais, d'autre part, n'a cessé de célébrer la rue et sa poésie.' M. Decaudin, 'Définir la décadence', in L'Esprit de décadence, 1980, p.11.

23. Quoted by P. Hamon, 'Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage', Poétique du récit, 1977, p.175 n.55.

24. R. Barthes, 'Pierre Loti: Aziyadé', Nouveaux essais critiques, 1972, p.170. S/Z, 1970, p.113.

25. D. Grojnowski, op. cit., p.78.

26. Dr N. Hewitt has pointed out that phonetically the end of 'Floressas' and the beginning of 'des' do in fact give 'SAD', so that Grojnowski's 'interrogation' is not entirely made at random.

27. D. Grojnowski, op. cit., p.76.

28. P. Hamon, op. cit., p.149.

29. See Lettres à Zola, pp.79-81.

30. Meurgey de Tupigny, op. cit., p.11.

31. See D.G., 'Huysmans Charles, Georges (extraits d'archives)', 34-44. 7, Autumn 1980.

32. In the final version of A rebours, of course, the youth Auguste Langlois disappoints des Esseintes and fails to commit a crime. But in the manuscript of A rebours in the Bibliothèque Nationale (n.a.fr. 15761), des Esseintes recounts this episode to two friends and reports: 'Et le fait est, qu'il y a 15 jours - Tenez lisez le Figaro - mon petit Auguste a été condamné à 7 ans de réclusion, pour vols qualifiés - Il ira à Pontevrault, je pense, car je me suis inquiété de lui, ce brave enfant - Il en reviendra avec des instincts de brigandage perfectionnés et je l'espère aussi, avec des vices charnels (illegible), en plus' (f.132).

Until Mme Rose Portassier's recent critical edition of A rebours (Imprimerie Nationale, 1981), little critical account had been taken of the many variants between this manuscript and the final version of the novel. See also P. Cogny, 'L'Obsession créatrice du mot: étude de notes inédites de J.-K. Huysmans', in L'Esprit de décadence, 1980.

33. Compare the defeatism expressed in En ménage, exemplified by remarks such as 'nous sommes les gens qui nous contentons des à peu près' (p.28) with the frenzy of A rebours.

34. See P. Jullian, Robert de Montesquiou: un prince 1900, 1965, and the introduction to J. Péladan, Le Vice suprême, 1979.

Jullian writes of Lorrain, in Jean Lorrain ou le Satiricon 1900, 1974, p.13: 'Entre Baudelaire et Cocteau, il fut l'écrivain drogué; avant Genet, il fut l'écrivain pédéraste, se considérant comme l'ambassadeur de Sodome auprès du Tout-Paris. Sa réputation était telle qu'un assassin fut acquitté après avoir avoué qu'il était corrompu par les livres de "l'homme aux yeux de vipère qui couche dans des draps bleus".'

The novelist Hugues Rebell could also be added to the list, if we are to believe Hubert Juin in Le Livre de Paris 1900, 1977, p.41: 'Fort occupé du sexe en général, il s'était pris d'affection pour une chatte et l'excitait avec un crayon spécialement affûté à cet effet. Lorsqu'il avait d'autres besognes, il sonnait son valet de chambre, et commandait: "Firmin, branlez la chatte!"'

35. H.-M. Gallot, Explication de J.-K. Huysmans, 1954, p.105. Compare A rebours, p.37: 'l'homme a fait, dans son genre, aussi bien que le Dieu auquel il croit.'

According to J. Monfériet, in 'Espace et temps dans l'univers décadent: l'exemple d'A Rebours', BSH, 70, 1979, p.21: 'Nouveau démiurge, il a bien le sentiment de se livrer à une activité sacrée, quand elle n'est pas totalement sacrilège, par la perversion des lois de la nature.'

36. Valéry in fact described des Esseintes as 'Quel Faust plus exaspéré, plus malade, plus tordu et sans rémission, et sans ange de la fin!' Quoted by Florence de Lussy, 'Valéry et Huysmans', in Colloque Paul Valéry, 1978, p.278.

37. Neurosis is 'cette singulière maladie qui ravage les races à bout de sang' (A rebours, p.168).

38. 'To the artist in Zola, heredity was a substitute for old-fashioned Fate, the Spinner of the Homeric sagas....' F.W.J. Hemmings, Émile Zola. 1970, p.57.

39. In the end des Esseintes succumbs to the will of his doctor, thus confirming Alphonse Daudet's observation of 'la puissance du médecin dans les temps modernes, dernier prêtre, croyance suprême, invincible superstition' in chapter five of Sapho, published the same year as A rebours. Daudet's son Léon in fact wrote a macabre Swiftian satire on the powers of the medical profession, Les Morticoles. 1894.

40. 'Névrose... Se dit d'"Affections nerveuses très répandues, sans base anatomique connue et qui, quoique intimement liées à la vie psychique du malade, n'altèrent pas (comme les psychoses) sa personnalité et, par suite, s'accompagnent d'une conscience pénible et le plus souvent excessive de l'état morbide" (A. Hesnard in Porot, Manuel psychiatrie).' P. Robert, Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française. 1966.

A. Arenfeld, in his Traité des névroses (2nd edition, 1883), a work consulted by Huysmans when writing A rebours, gives two characteristics which distinguish neuroses from other diseases: '1. trouble intéressant spécialement les fonctions nerveuses; 2. absence de lésion anatomique' (p.4).

41. 'L'Etre inerte et l'être vivant sont soumis à la même fatalité de grandiose laideur, d'universelle maladie. C'est plus qu'une boutade; c'est sa formule de l'esthétique pessimiste que Huysmans met dans la bouche de des Esseintes: "Tout n'est que syphilis".' G. Bachelard, La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté. 1948, p.214.

See also P. Wald Lasowski, Syphilis: essai sur la littérature française du XIXe siècle, 1982.

42. 'Cette tératologie des substances, ce pessimisme matériel, est une des caractéristiques les plus nettes du rêve et du style de Huysmans. (...) Ainsi la maladie est un but, la véritable finalité non seulement des êtres vivants, mais du monde.' G. Bachelard, op. cit., pp.215-16.

43. M. Desbruères, ed., La France fantastique 1900. 1978, pp.16-17.

44. M. Collomb, 'Le Cauchemar de Des Esseintes', Romantisme. 19, 1978.

45. 'Il s'agit là d'un rêve répertorié et expliqué par la psychanalyse. Il dit aussi la hantise de la déchéance. Le Lazare de Zola (La Joie de vivre), qui a tellement peur de la mort, rêve aussi que ses dents tombent.' R. Fortassier, op. cit., p.335.

46. M. Collomb, op. cit., p.87.

47. Robert Baldick translates 'membres' rather coyly as 'limbs' (Against Nature, Penguin, 1959, p.99).

48. J. Meyers, Painting and the Novel. Manchester, 1975, p.84.

49. A key work for explorations of androgyny is Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), where a similar desire to break the

limitations of the self is found: 'Je suis prisonnier dans moi-même, et toute évasion est impossible', writes d'Albert; his most intense pleasure would be to be another; the ultimate frustration in the presence of beauty is the impossibility of absorbing it into the self, or being absorbed in it. (Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, p.111, p.116, p.192.)

Péladan's *Princesse Léonora d'Este* in *Le Vice suprême* (published in 1884 like *A rebours*) is another 'Esprit androgyne' and dreams of the fusion of the ideal couple: 'Deux! l'existence double! un être ajouté à son être; en soi deux, à côté du désir la satisfaction; le rêve saint de l'androgyne réalisé selon les lois, la création initiale retrouvée.' (*Le Vice suprême*, 1979, p.82, p.86.) See also P. Benier, 'Péladan: un décadent contre la décadence', in *L'Esprit de décadence*, 1980.

50. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*. (L'Intégrale) 1968, p.638. Péladan observes in *Le Vice suprême*: 'L'amour est une volonté d'absorption injuste et mauvaise. Nul être n'a le droit de se proposer comme l'infini à un autre être' (p.221).

51. For an account of the myths of syphilitic degeneration at the turn of the century, see A. Corbin, *Les Filles de nocé*, 1978 and R.L. Williams, *The Horror of Life*, 1980.

The entry under 'syphilis' in Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* says: 'tout le monde en est affecté'. (Cited by R. Fortassier, op. cit., p.335.)

52. 'L'Univers imaginaire qui envahit son sommeil est source d'angoisse et préfigure la névrose qui s'emparera finalement de des Esseintes.' J. Monfériet, op. cit., p.18.

53. Freud does not accept the hereditary nature of neurosis, but observes that Charcot strongly emphasised the role of heredity: 'heredity was to be regarded as the sole cause. Accordingly, hysteria was a form of degeneracy.' 'Charcot' (1893) in *Standard Edition of Complete Works*, III, 1962, p.21.

G. Lavalée writes, in 1917: 'il faut se souvenir que *A rebours* date de 1884, époque où Charcot et l'école de la Salpêtrière jouissaient de toute leur renommée, où l'hystérie prenait une extension que de plus récentes recherches lui ont fait perdre. La pathologie mentale d'aujourd'hui reconnaît plutôt en Des Esseintes un type merveilleusement caractérisé de ce qu'on a appelé dégénérescence ou déséquilibre mental, sorte de disjonction de l'activité cérébrale qui apparaît chez des êtres prédisposés, plus ou moins marqués par les stigmates de la dégénérescence (signes du crâne, de la voûte palatine, de la face, de l'oreille).' *Essai sur la psychologie morbide de Huysmans*, 1917, pp.17-18.

54. See R. Baldick, *La Vie de J.-K. Huysmans*, 1958, p.139.

55. See J. Lethève, 'Le Thème de la décadence dans les lettres françaises à la fin du XIXe siècle', *BHLF*, Jan.-March 1963.

While in 'La Névrose de Des Esseintes', Lethève writes: 'Les modes médicales sont comme les autres: chaque époque met en avant quelques mots magiques sous lesquels elle recouvre indistinctement tout ce qui l'obsède. Or, créée par Pinel en 1795, la notion de névrose finit par désigner au XIXe siècle toutes sortes de maladies relevant à la fois de troubles physiologiques et de troubles mentaux.' *CTSJ*, 8, 1963, pp.69-70.

56. O. Mirbeau, Les 21 Jours d'un neurasthénique. 1901, p.288, p.337.

57. J. Lethève, 'Le Thème de la décadence...', p.49. Compare E. Caramaschi, Postface to Germinie Lacerteux. Naples/Paris, 1968, p.xix.

In his Notice to Les Fleurs du mal, Gautier offers a definition of 'la névrose', seeing it as concomitant with the pursuit of art and the ideal (2nd edition, 1869, p.12).

58. Quoted by J. Lethève, 'La Névrose de Des Esseintes', p.72. See also R. Pouillart, 'Paul Bourget et l'esprit de décadence', Les Lettres Romanes. 1 August 1951.

59. M. Lemaire, Le Dandysme de Baudelaire à Mallarmé. 1978, p.13, p.153.

60. Baudelaire, Curiosités esthétiques, ed. H. Lemaître, (Garnier) 1962, p.482 n.

61. Ibid., p.485.

62. J. Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'Du dandysme et de George Brummell', in Sur le dandysme, prefaced by R. Kempf, 1971, p.160, p.148 n.

63. Ibid., p.160.

64. Ibid., p.108, p.117, p.136.

65. Ibid., p.112.

66. Ibid., p.126, p.166.

67. Baudelaire, Curiosités esthétiques, p.483. Lemaire remarks: 'Généralement, la débauche du dandy consistera en la réunion des plaisirs de la table à ceux du sexe.' (Op. cit., p.64.)

68. 'A l'opposé de l'illusion réaliste qui s'efforce de gommer tous les indices de sa fabrication afin de susciter un effet de présence, de transparence du réel, l'imitation décadente souligne toutes les marques du leurre pour mettre l'accent sur l'artificialité du produit.' Françoise Gaillard, 'A rebours ou l'inversion des signes', in L'Esprit de décadence, 1980, p.131.

Nevertheless, one should add that A rebours still functions within a context of mimesis -- unlike more recent experimental fiction.

69. M. Lemaire, op. cit., p.13.

70. D. Grojnowski, op. cit., p.87.

71. Sade 'a revendiqué sous sa forme la plus extrême l'arbitraire de son bon plaisir et prétendu fonder idéologiquement cette revendication. Il a échoué. Ni dans sa vie ni dans son oeuvre il n'a surmonté les contradictions du solipsisme.' In fact Sade remains 'du côté des privilégiés' socially: 'la révolte même est un luxe nécessitant de la culture, des loisirs, un recul devant les besoins de l'existence.' Simone de Beauvoir, Faut-il brûler Sade?. 1972, p.7, p.80.

72. P. Jullian, Jean Lorrain ou le Satiricon 1900. 1974, p.84.
73. Simone de Beauvoir says that Sade attacks charity and philanthropy because 'ce sont des mystifications qui visent à concilier ce qui est inconciliable: les appétits inassouvis du pauvre et l'égoïste cupidité du riche.' (Op. cit., p.67.)
74. R. Kempf, Dandies. Baudelaire et compagnie. 1977, p.63.
75. Ibid., pp.162-63.
76. Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes. p.630.
77. G. Lukács, The Historical Novel. 1962, p.206.
78. Ibid., p.182, p.193, p.199.
79. R. Terdiman, The Dialectics of Isolation. New Haven/London, 1976, p.69.
80. Ibid., pp.84-85, p.86.
81. P. Bourget, Essais de psychologie contemporaine. 1899 (1883-85), p.8.
82. P. Bourget, review of L'Art moderne in Le Parlement. 31 May 1883.
83. 'La traduction, pierre de touche, force à réfléchir sur la portée d'un titre, riche, il est vrai, de toutes les régressions, reculades, résistances et rébellions contre l'époque, mais surtout contre la Nature. Against the grain -- à contrefil du tissu ou du bois -- ou Ritraso -- à reculons, rétrograde -- ne disent que le désir de se singulariser ou de remonter le temps. Mais Against Nature, préféré par le dernier en date des traducteurs anglais, exprime bien la révolte contre la Création.' R. Fortassier, op. cit., pp.14-15.
84. J. Lemaitre, Les Contemporains. 1ère série, 14th edition, 1890, p.330.
85. 'Huysmans' novel might best be understood as the elaboration of a single trait (inversion of normal values) according to a single principle (hyperbole). Indeed, its very inversion is hyperbolic.' D. Mickelsen, 'A Rebours: Spatial Form', French Forum. 3, 1, Jan. 1978, p.53.
86. M. Lemaire, op. cit., p.38.
87. J. Halpern, 'Decadent narrative: A Rebours'. Stanford French Review. II, 1, Spring 1978, p.94.
88. 'Dieses Haus muss zur Quintessenz seiner äusseren Existenz werden, es wird seine Welt verkörpern und ihm ein Leben in einer von ihm aufgebauten und auf ihn zugeschnittenen Umgebung ermöglichen.' H.J. Greif, Huysmans' 'A rebours' und die Dekadenz. Bonn, 1971, p.28.
89. D. Noguez, 'Des Esseintes et Nathanaël', Revue des lettres modernes. 280-84, 1971, p.72.

90. J. Lemaitre, op. cit., p.324. E. Hennequin, Quelques écrivains français, 1890, pp.200-01.
91. M. Lemaire, op. cit., pp.181-82.
92. For example, in chapter twelve of La-bas and 'Le Carnet vert'.
93. M. Lemaire, op. cit., p.35.
94. Compare note 21 above.
95. M. Lemaire, op. cit., p.135.
96. F. Livi, 'A rebours' et l'esprit décadent, 1972, p.129.
97. Compare Simone de Beauvoir on Sade: 'Dans le plaisir de torturer et bafouer une belle femme, écrit-il, il y a l'espèce de plaisir que donne le sacrilège ou la profanation des objets offerts à notre culte' (op. cit., p.40).
98. Simone de Beauvoir quotes Sade as saying: 'L'idée de Dieu est le seul tort que je ne puisse pardonner aux hommes' (ibid., p.55). See also G. Blin, Le Sadisme de Baudelaire, 1948, p.51.
99. A.E. Carter, The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, Toronto, 1958, p.5.
100. M. Praz, The Romantic Agony, 1970, p.105, p.107.
101. Simone de Beauvoir, op. cit., p.59.
102. Ibid., p.70.
103. 'Tout ce qui éloignait l'homme et surtout la femme de l'état de nature lui paraissait une invention heureuse.' Gautier, Notice to Les Fleurs du mal, p.26.
104. Quoted by F.W. Leakey, Baudelaire and Nature, Manchester/New York, 1969, p.121.
105. Letter to abbé Mugnier, quoted in F. Lefèvre, Entretiens sur J.-K. Huysmans, 1931, p.33.
106. See Leakey, op. cit., pp.155-56.
107. Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes, p.349.
108. A. Mugnier, J.-K. Huysmans à la Trappe, 1927, p.43. Quoted by G. Chastel, J.-K. Huysmans et ses amis, 1957, p.55.
109. 'Mais là où Baudelaire qualifie le Bien d'artificiel, Sade se contente de dire superficiel, ou encore conventionnel.' G. Blin, op. cit., p.50.
110. Journal, 16 November 1864. Quoted by F. Livi, op. cit., p.75n.36.
111. Ginisty, Gil Blas, 21 May 1884.

112. H. Brunner and J.L. de Coninck, En marche d'"A rebours" de J.-K. Huysmans. 1929, p.110.
113. J. Halpern, op. cit., p.94.
114. 'Les exercices de des Esseintes procèdent plus du dilettantisme que de l'expérience spirituelle, et... les conséquences théoriques sont infiniment plus riches et plus poussées chez Baudelaire dont on ne retrouve que le reflet et presque la caricature chez des Esseintes.' J. Monfériet, 'Des Esseintes et Baudelaire', in L'Esprit de décadence. 1980, pp.110-11.
115. E. Leach, Lévi-Strauss. 1970, p.34.
116. G. Moore, Confessions of a Young Man. 1904 (1886), pp.244-45.
117. J. Meyers, op. cit., p.94.
118. Letter of 3 September 1891, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert 45.
119. Huysmans considered other possible conclusions for A rebours. as a variant in the manuscript shows: 'Des Esseintes tomba accablé sur une chaise. D(an)s 2 jours je serai à Paris; le ciel est vide, mais la fosse de mes dégoûts et de mes haines, reste pleine!' (f.119).
120. A distortion akin to that practised by the eccentric, as defined by Lemaire: 'L'excentrique attire l'attention, mais non tant sur lui-même que sur le personnage qu'il joue. On parle de lui, mais d'un "lui" qui est un autre inventé de toutes pièces. Ainsi réalise-t-il le double but de se montrer et de se cacher' (op. cit., p.49).
121. 'It is sometimes difficult to know when Huysmans is laughing at the reader -- and at himself.' J. Laver, The First Decadent. 1954, p.165.
122. Huysmans' mystification becomes a more complex concealment in Flaubert: 'the most interesting narrative effects in Flaubert involve, almost invariably, rapid shifts of perspective which prevent one from determining who speaks or from where.' J. Culler, Flaubert. 1974, pp.117-18.
123. J. Halpern op. cit., p.99.
124. See M. Pumaroli, op. cit., notes to chapter three of A rebours. p.407 ff. R. de Gourmont, 'Souvenirs sur Huysmans', Promenades littéraires. III, 1963.
125. D. Hoguez, op. cit., p.78.
126. L.R. Furst, 'The Structure of Romantic Agony', Comparative Literature Studies, X, 2, 1973, p.134.
127. Gautier, Notice to Les Fleurs du mal. p.17.
128. P. Bourget, Essais de psychologie contemporaine. pp.15-16.

129. Ibid., p.398.
130. See Noguez, op. cit., p.70 and Fumaroli, op. cit., p.404 n.25.
131. C. Wade, 'The contributions of color and light to differing levels of reality in the novels of J.-K. Huysmans', Symposium, Winter 1974, p.380 n.10.
132. R.P. Weinreb, 'Structural techniques in A rebours', The French Review, XLIX, 2, 1975, p.223.
133. D. Mickelsen, op. cit., p.51.
134. Ibid., pp.48-49.
135. 'Huysmans, futur préfacier d'un catéchisme, futur hagiographe de sainte Lydwine, cherche peut-être ici, inconsciemment, un style possible pour une littérature apologétique, ou plus généralement spiritualiste.' R. Fortassier, op. cit., p.22.
136. M. Fumaroli, op. cit., p.415 n.85.
137. J. Lemaitre, op. cit., p.327.
138. See note 124 above.
139. Quoted in Lettres à Zola, p.106.
140. 25 May 1884, ibid., p.103.
141. J. Halpern, op. cit., p.99.
142. R.P. Weinreb, op. cit., p.228.
143. These reflections are close to the notions of symbolism, as defined for example by R.N. Stromberg: 'The mood of the symbolist movement is startlingly different from that of naturalism. The writer is no longer considered a scientist but a seer, a mystic. He does not seek to describe the external world with clinical exactitude, but to grope among the shadows of the mind; Rimbaud says that the poet must deliberately derange his senses. He writes verses that, strictly speaking, have little if any meaning, but which drug and enchant the mind. Vast sociological treatises give place to small gems of verse. Poetry, the symbolists believed, is not meant to convey abstract thought. It should be "pure", in the sense that it should exist in its own right, not for some extrinsic purpose such as communicating knowledge or teaching a moral. It should not be vulgarized by contact with the masses, for only a few rare spirits can be poets. Yet from its mysterious visions may come images that will change the world. In a society grown corrupt and degenerate the poet must draw apart and proclaim his defiance of conventions, cultivating his own unique poetic sensibility.' Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, 1968, p.188.
144. Overstatement is of course itself meant to achieve a heightened form of expression. The 'quatorze cents mots du dialecte racinien' no longer suffice, argues Gautier, for 'Ce style de décadence (qui) est le dernier mot du Verbe sommé de tout exprimer et poussé à l'extrême outrance.' Notice to Les Fleurs du mal, p. 18, p.17.

145. 'Huysmans a préparé, sans s'en douter, la transmutation du naturalisme en symbolisme, conséquence fatale d'un travail de style poussé à l'extrême, d'une sorte de majoration systématique de l'expression.' Valéry, quoted in F. Lefèvre, op. cit., p.39.

146. Compare G. Blin, 'Recours de Baudelaire à la sorcellerie', in Le Sadisme de Baudelaire: 'Le sorcier vise le plus par le moins, d'autant plus puissant qu'il enferme davantage d'effets dans la même cause et qu'il possède plus avant l'art métonymique de "prendre la partie pour le tout".' (p.94)

'Sur le plan de l'art, cette attitude implique la recherche du "resserrement": Baudelaire condamne donc comme Poe l'épopée dont l'ampleur ne peut que "diminuer l'effet magique de la poésie" -- et, pour sa part, quand il crée, il poursuit la gageure d'un vers qui saurait enrober ou mobiliser "l'infini dans le fini".' (pp.94-95)

147. 'Le Carnet vert', handwritten copy by Pierre Lambert, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert 75.

148. 'Il y a dans le mot, dans le verbe, quelque chose de sacré qui nous défend d'en faire un jeu de hasard. Manier savamment une langue, c'est pratiquer une espèce de sorcellerie évocatoire.' Baudelaire, 'Théophile Gautier', Oeuvres complètes, p.464.

149. 'C'est, d'un mot, Huysmans qui s'est fait une dotation de 50 000 livres de rentes perpétuelles, payables chaque année en un chèque tiré sur la banque de l'Imagination.' H. Bachelin, J.-K. Huysmans, du naturalisme littéraire au naturalisme mystique, 1926, p.119.

150. D. Noguez, op. cit., pp.68-69.

151. M. Besnard-Coursodon, 'A Rebours: le corps parlé', BSH, 170-71, 1978, p.56.

152. D. Noguez, op. cit., p.81.

153. D. Tachon, op. cit., in Mélanges Pierre Lambert consacrés à Huysmans, 1975.

154. D. Grojnowski, op. cit., p.78.

155. G. Blin, Stendhal et les problèmes du roman, 1953, p.37.

156. 'Modernist' as defined, say, by R. Barthes: 'aujourd'hui, écrire n'est pas "raconter", c'est dire que l'on raconte, et rapporter tout le référent ("ce qu'on dit") à cet acte de locution...' 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits', in Poétique du récit, 1977, p.42.

157. B. Neiss, 'Huysmans et le problème du moderne', BSH, 170-71, p.103 n.11. According to J. de Palacio: 'Et c'est bien là le signe de la modernité de Huysmans que cette réduction à l'écriture, qui fait apparaître des préoccupations singulièrement actuelles là où un Mauriac, par exemple, ne voyait encore qu'une stylistique vieillie et périmée.' 'Écriture romanesque et écriture critique', *ibid.*, p.202.

158. A rebours, pp.287-88.

159. 'La Parole détient aux yeux de Baudelaire le pouvoir de création absolue dont l'avaient dotée les livres hermétiques et la Cabale.' G. Blin, Le Sadisme de Baudelaire, p.98.

160. M. Fumaroli, op. cit., p.26.

161. Huysmans, En marge, 1927, p.57. Lettres à Zola, p.105.

162. M. Fumaroli, op. cit., p.33.

163. Ibid., p.46.

164. Lettres à Zola

165. P. Waldner, introduction to A rebours, (Garnier-Flammarion) 1978, p.15.

166. Ibid., p.16.

167. Ibid., p.40

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

The quotation from Éliphas Lévi is taken from Huysmans' unpublished notebook, 'Le Carnet vert'. (Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Fonds Lambert 75, handwritten copy by Pierre Lambert.) The observation indicates not only Huysmans' fascination with the more lurid aspects of the supernatural (having studied the mating habits of peasants, he turns to those of incubuses), but also the shortcomings of the supernatural: the coldness of the sperm suggesting death overtaking life, the evil of sexual possession and magical violation. Compare the third dream in En rade, p.217.

1. George Sand inaugurated the genre of the rustic novel with her somewhat idealised studies. But La Terre is 'perhaps the first novel to have a peasant as its central character. For Zola, the peasant was above all concerned with the acquisition of land, to which he was attached with an animal passion; he represented simplicity and ferocity, greed and conservatism.'

T. Zeldin, France 1848-1945, vol. one, 1973, pp.132-33.

2. L. Bloy, 'J.-K. Huysmans et son dernier livre', L'Art moderne. (Brussels) 8 and 15 May 1887.

3. En rade was first serialised in the Revue indépendante between November 1886 and April 1887. The lines describing the covering of the cow were omitted.

4. 'Le Carnet vert', 10 May 1887, p.11. Compare a letter to Bloy and Georges Landry of 26 August 1885 in Bloy, Villiers, Huysmans: lettres, 1980, p.40.

5. 'Le 10 mai 1887 - Ce que j'ai rêvé sur mon balcon, devant une voiture de déménagement dans la cour, à un havre lointain, à une vie loin de Paris. Et voici qu'en Juin 1899, ce départ va se réaliser - la 3e étape et la dernière, j'espère de ma vie. Le Médan pauvre et quiet est prêt - 1887! C'était avant La Bas!

Et 1901 tout est par terre.' (Last sentence added 1901.)
'Le Carnet vert', p.114.

6. Huysmans stayed at Jutigny, near the Château de Lourps, in July 1884, August 1885 and 1886. His mistress Anna Meunier's illness began about this time; she finally died of general paralysis in 1895. See R. Baldick, La Vie de J.-K. Huysmans, 1958.

A letter from Bloy to François Coppée of 17 December 1885 reveals that Huysmans also shared Jacques Marles's financial anxieties: 'Huysmans est en danger de périr. Vous le savez, il a un emploi de ministère et un atelier de brochure.

Or, l'emploi est tout juste suffisant pour ne pas mourir de misère et la brochure ne marche absolument plus. Non seulement elle a cessé d'être une faible ressource, un appoint dérisoire, mais elle est devenue une menace terrible, une menace de prochaine, et presque inévitable faillite -- devant entraîner la révocation de l'employé et aboutir au naufrage complet. Telle est, en aussi peu de mots que possible, la vraie situation d'un des écrivains les plus rares de cette fin de siècle.' Bloy, Villiers, Huysmans: lettres, pp.51-52.

7. Letter of 12 May 1887, quoted in BSH, 26, 1953, p.21.
8. See Y. Vadé, 'Onirisme et symbolique: d'En Rade à La Cathédrale'. BSH, 170-71, 1978, p.249.
9. Lettres inédites à Émile Zola. Geneva/Lille, 1953, June 1887, p.127. According to G. Geffroy, reviewing En rade in La Justice (26 July 1887): 'Le désir d'échapper à la réalité en transformant cette réalité en symboles n'est pas seulement inscrit sur la couverture du volume, il est aussi visible au long du livre, à plusieurs tournants de chapitres. La conception est double, et l'on assiste à une très difficile mise en oeuvre d'une antithèse.' Zola himself of course published Le Rêve the following year (1888). But F.W.J. Hemmings calls this book a 'fairy-tale' (Émile Zola, 1970, p.238) and G. King observes that the reader 'distinctly feels the author is addressing him through several cubic metres of cotton-wool' (Garden of Zola, 1978, p.267).
10. R. Baldick, op. cit., p.129. L. Bloy, op. cit.
11. H.-M. Gallot, Explication de J.-K. Huysmans, 1954, p.115.
12. M. Issacharoff, Huysmans devant la critique en France, 1970, p.79.
13. 'The main character of the novel is the château itself, in direct descent from the mansions of Gothic tales....' A.E. Carter, 'Huysmans and the Middle Ages', in Medieval Studies in honor of R.W. Linker, Madrid, 1973, p.20.
14. J.H. Matthews, Surrealism and the Novel, Ann Arbor, 1966, p.36.
15. Quoted by R. Baldick, op. cit., p.173.
16. J.H. Matthews, op. cit., p.40, p.38.
17. P. Citti, 'Lecture d'En Rade, réflexion sur un roman enrayé', BSH, 170-71, 1978.
18. For example, Antoine and Norine in chapter one; the peasants in the inn at Jutigny in chapter seven.
19. Note Antoine and Norine's tutoiement of Jacques and Louise; which is not reciprocated. The peasants also regard their labour in the fields as a 'sacerdoce' (p.137).
20. Zola writes on La Terre: 'J'y veux faire tenir tous nos paysans, avec leur histoire, leurs moeurs, leur rôle; j'y veux poser la question sociale de la propriété; j'y veux montrer où nous allons, dans cette crise de l'agriculture, si grave en ce moment... Ajoutez que j'entends rester artiste, écrivain, écrire le poème vivant de la terre, les saisons, les travaux, les champs, les gens, les bêtes, la campagne entière.' Quoted by F.W.J. Hemmings, op. cit., pp.225-26.
21. Anatole France reacted violently to the equivalent scene in La Terre: 'M. Zola a comblé cette fois la mesure de l'indécence et de la grossièreté. Par une invention qui outrage la femme dans ce qu'elle a de plus sacré, M. Zola a imaginé une paysanne accouchant pendant que sa vache vèle. (...) La crudité des détails passe toute idée.'

Il n'a pas moins offensé la nature dans la bête que dans la femme, et je lui en veux encore d'avoir sali l'innocente vache en étalant sans pitié les misères de sa souffrance et de sa maternité.' La Vie littéraire, 1ère série, 35th edition, n.d., p.235.

22. P. Cogny, J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité, 1953, p.114.

23. F. Gaillard, 'En rade ou le roman des énergies bloquées', in Le Naturalisme, 1978, p.268.

24. Ibid., p.271.

25. See En rade, p.19. Huysmans was unsure how to spell 'Ah ben c'étant': 'il hésitait entre C'est tant (idée de valeur) et C'est temps (idée d'heure). Girard connaissait l'expression et l'indiqua: C'étant -- Cela étant.' (BSH, 59, 1972, p.43.)

26. F. Gaillard, op. cit., p.269.

27. Ibid., pp.275-76.

28. See for example En rade, p.122ff.

29. Discussed in chapter fourteen of A rebours, p.288ff.

30. 'Il découvrirait chez Louise une âpreté héréditaire de paysanne, oubliée à Paris, développée par le retour dans l'atmosphère du pays d'origine, hâtée par les appréhensions d'une pauvreté soudaine.' En rade, p.183.

31. H.A. Hatzfeld, 'Discussion sur le naturalisme français', Studies in Philology, 39, 1942.

32. For an interesting account of recent scientific study of the influence of the moon on human life, see L. Watson, Supernature, 1974.

33. Y. Vadé, op. cit., p.245.

34. Ibid., p.246.

35. To be compared with the vision in Baudelaire's poem 'Rêve parisien'. See P. Cogny, 'Baudelaire et En rade de J.-K. Huysmans', Mercur de France, 1 October 1949,

36. Y. Vadé, op. cit., p.249.

37. F. Gaillard, op. cit., p.274.

38. G. Bachelard, La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté, 1948, p.206.

39. For example, the description of the stars inducing vertigo at the end of chapter four. The owl with which Jacques does battle in chapter two also appears like a figure from a nightmare, though it is actually real.

40. 'Tout comme Louise, la lune était déjà, à l'origine, un grand corps malade qu'une mort astrale a immobilisé au milieu d'une vaste secousse.' Mireille Favier-Richoux, 'Le Theme de l'eau dans En Rade', BSH, 68, 1978, p.55. On hysteria see note 104 below.

41. Y. Vadé, op. cit., p.250.
42. According to André Breton, 'Huysmans, avec une clairvoyance sans égale, (a) formulé de toutes pièces la plupart des lois qui vont régir l'affectivité moderne, pénétré le premier la constitution histologique du réel et (s'est) élevé avec En rade aux sommets de l'inspiration.' Anthologie du l'humour noir. 1940, p.110.
43. G. Bachelard, op. cit., p.217.
44. M. Favier-Richoux (op. cit.), for example, has outlined the metaphorical network based on water which is developed throughout the book. In similar fashion, images related to surfaces, heights and depths frequently recur, underlining the intersection of the horizontal and vertical axes of En rade: Jacques examining the abyss of the stars (pp.96-97), the leprous skin of the château (p.54), or the cellars, which he finds, significantly, blocked (p.195). Again, the alternation between exploration of the outer world of Lourps and the occult depths of the soul is illustrated by a series of metaphors related to light and darkness, day and night. Thus the agonising, sleepless night of chapter two is contrasted with the 'fluide de joie' (p.62) produced by the sun in the next chapter, which ends with Jacques sleeping refreshed under its beneficial light (p.74); whereas twilight induces anguish (p.92); and Jacques's marriage has become 'un crépuscule d'hiver; long et morne' (p.120).
45. La-bas has in fact been translated into English in the series 'The Dennis Wheatley Library of the Occult' (Sphere Books, 1974).
46. 'L'idée de jouer sur deux plans et, trente-cinq ans avant Les faux monnayeurs de Gide, de juxtaposer au roman le roman du romancier était excellente: mais n'est-elle pas gauchement mise en oeuvre dans La-bas?' R. Kanter, 'Situation littéraire de Huysmans', CTSJ, 8, 1963, p.18.
47. A.E. Carter, op. cit. Zola apparently considered that Huysmans 'avait une fêlure'.
48. See G. Veyssset, Huysmans et la médecine, 1950, p. 32, and J. Bricaud, Huysmans et le satanisme. Huysmans occultiste et magicien, 1913.
49. Lettres inédites à Arij Prins, Geneva, 1977, 7 April 1890, p.190.
50. 'Plus qu'un roman, La-bas apparaît comme un tableau de la vie parisienne de la fin du XIXe siècle dans sa frénésie satanique.' J.-B. Baronian, Panorama de la littérature fantastique de langue française, 1978, p.142.
51. J. Huret, Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire, 1891, p.14. (First published in L'Écho de Paris, March to July 1891.)
52. M. Raimond in Histoire littéraire de la France, 1873-1913, vol. ten, 1978, pp.47-49.
53. V. Fournel, La Gazette de France, 8 June 1891.

54. G. Docquois gives an account of Huysmans' earnings as an author and civil servant in 'Vingt-sept ans de bouteille', Le Journal, 6 September 1893. See also letter to Prins, 1 April 1895.

This success was of course purely relative: Zola's L'Argent, for example, sold 50,000 copies within a few days of publication in 1891. (See M. Raimond, op. cit., p.43.)

55. R. Baldick, op. cit., p.201.

56. For such identifications, see H. Bossier, Un personnage de roman, Brussels/Paris, 1943.

57. La-bas was serialised in L'Écho de Paris from 16 February 1891 to 20 April 1891, and published in April. On 28 May 1891 Huysmans took the decisive step of meeting the abbé Mugnier.

58. J. Decottignies, 'La-Bas ou la phase démoniaque de l'écriture', RSH, 170-71, 1978.

59. Lettres à Prins, 15 June 1890, p.195.

60. See M. Cressot, La Phrase et le vocabulaire de J.-K. Huysmans, 1938, p.124.

61. Lettres à Prins, 15 June 1890, p.195.

62. Ibid., 17 May 1890, p.192.

63. See P. Cogny, 'Écriture de la destruction: transcription romanesque des lettres d'amour authentiques dans La-Bas', RSH, 170-71, 1978 and the appendix to Cogny's edition of La-bas (Garnier-Flammarion, 1978).

64. Péladan declared that the book was 'en 400 pages, un tissu d'erreurs, d'incongruités et de naïvetés, montrant chez l'auteur une ignorance absolue et définitive des lois du Satanisme.' (Le Jour, 28 April 1891, quoted from L. Descaves's notes to La-bas, II,250.)

Papus commented: 'Si j'avais un avis à fournir au sujet de La-Bas, je dirais que c'est l'oeuvre d'un homme de talent, mystifié de la façon la plus évidente par quelque individu avide de réclame.' (L'Art libre, 1 May 1891; see also L'Initiation, May 1891.)

Such criticisms merely reply in kind to the abusive remarks made about the two occultists in La-bas (I,215; II,219).

65. Abbé E. Bossard, Gilles de Rais, 1885. Details patently taken from Bossard are the beatings of the unnamed sorcerer and Prélati (Bossard, pp.135-36, p.157), or the covering of the crucifix during Gilles's confession (Bossard, p.210), for example.

66. G. Bataille, ed., Le Procès de Gilles de Rais, 1965, p.95, p.68, p.31.

67. 'J'ai été frappé à Carnoet de l'obscénité sinistre des très-vieux arbres - faire ds le livre.' 'Le Carnet vert', p.43. Similar scenes of delirium can of course be found in La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, 'La Légende de saint Julien l'hospitalier', or Mirbeau's novel L'Abbé Jules.

68. E. Bossard, op. cit., p.183.

69. September 1889, quoted in BSH, 33, 1957, p.96.

70. Michel Bataille, Gilles de Rais, 1966.

R. Villeneuve remarks: 'Huysmans éprouve un plaisir maladif à décrire les abominables forfaits de Rays; ses joies fécales, son vampirisme, ses concours de beauté sépulcrale' ('Huysmans et Gilles de Rais', CTSJ, 8, 1963, p.100).

71. C. Wilson, The Occult, 1979 (1971), p.448.

72. M. Milner, 'Allocution sous le cloître Saint-Séverin', BSH, 70, 1979.

73. Gilles de Rais is presented in various ways: in discussions between Durtal and des Hermies (chapter four); via the presentation of Durtal's 'notes' (chapter six), or his reverie (chapter eight) or vision (chapter eleven). In each case, however, the episodes take on an autonomous status, so that it seems misleading to talk about Gilles as though he were really Durtal's creation, which he nominally is.

74. See G. Bataille, op. cit., pp.203-04.

75. Whereas society refused Sade his private enjoyments, claims Simone de Beauvoir: 'Puisqu'on ne peut séparer avec tranquillité le mal du bien pour se donner tour à tour à l'un et à l'autre, c'est en face du bien et même en fonction de lui qu'il faut revendiquer le mal' (Faut-il brûler Sade?, 1972 (1955), p.19).

76. M. Praz, The Romantic Agony, 1970 (1933).

77. Certains, p.88.

According to P. Viallaneix, Michelet's La Sorcière (1862) portrays 'la grandeur de la femme excommuniée et compatissante' (preface to Garnier-Flammarion edition, 1966, p.19), while P. Hughes observes that 'all fundamental beliefs pass always through women, particularly in primitive society and in suppressed racial units' (Witchcraft, 1965 (1952), p.86).

78. R.-P. Colin, 'Huysmans et les saluts du "vieux garçon"', in La Femme au XIXe siècle, (ed. R. Bellet) Lyon, 1978, p.114.

79. Huysmans dismisses Strindberg's theory that women's inferiority is due to menstruation, which drains the brain, adding: 'la femme n'a pas à être intelligente, au sens que nous donnons à ce mot: elle a à être experte en plaisirs charnels et en bons soins. Là, se borne son rôle, alors qu'elle cohabite avec l'homme, et c'est pourquoi les idées d'émancipation dont on nous rebat actuellement les oreilles me semblent absurdes.' Gil Blas, 1 February 1895.

80. M.-T. Dressay, 'Le Vide et le plein dans La-Bas de J.-K. Huysmans', thèse de 3e cycle, Université de Paris X, 1975, p.131.

81. Ibid., p.131.

82. Ibid., pp.137-38.

83. 'C'est elle qui se charge de toute l'obscénité enfouie au fond du coeur humain, tel un déversoir d'animalité, un champ d'épandage situé à l'écart des lumières, où l'on peut éjaculer à loisir les ténébreuses et répugnantes tendances du corps.' Ibid., p.135.

84. Durtal is actually a town near Angers. The name was suggested by Huysmans' friend Michel de Lézinier (see Avec Huysmans, promesses et souvenirs, 1928, chapter seven 'Le Nom de Durtal').

85. In his introduction to an English translation of La-bas, Dennis Wheatley tells us that 'The majority of British readers will be annoyed by the first chapter of this book and wonder what on earth it is all about' (Sphere Books, 1974, p.5).

86. L. Bloy, 'L'Incarnation de l'adverbe', La Plume, 1 June 1891.

87. 'L'histoire de Gilles de Rais forme un contrepoint des plus justes et des plus subtils avec l'histoire de Durtal, et les entretiens documentaires qui pourraient alourdir le livre, sont au contraire un élément de naturel et de liberté' (A. Thérive, in CTSJ, 8, 1963, p.94).

'Qu'il s'agisse de ce livre, ou de la Cathédrale ou des Foules de Lourdes, le romancier J.-K. Huysmans n'a jamais réussi à perdre la détestable habitude naturaliste de se documenter, et c'est le poids des documents qui ralentit le seul mouvement qui nous entraîne, celui d'une âme en chemin' (R. Kanters, *ibid.*, p.18).

88. 'Deux spectacles d'horreur, mais l'un pour illustrer, au départ, la mystique blanche et l'autre, en finale, pour illustrer la mystique noire, sans qu'il soit parlé jamais de l'une ni de l'autre.' P. Cogny, introduction to La-bas, (Garnier-Flammarion) 1978, p.27.

89. Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'Le Dessous de cartes d'une partie de whist', Les Diaboliques, (Garnier-Flammarion) 1967, p.202.

90. 'In our eyes, the demons are bad and reprehensible wishes, derivatives of instinctual impulses that have been repudiated and repressed. We merely eliminate the projection of these mental entities into the external world which the middle ages carried out; instead, we regard them as having arisen in the patient's internal life, where they have their abode.'

Sigmund Freud, 'A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis', Complete Works (ed. J. Strachey), 1961, vol. 19, p.72.

91. See C. Maingon, L'Univers artistique de J.-K. Huysmans, 1977, p.144.

92. Now in the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

93. 'Tortured almost to the point of hysteria, grotesque yet sublime, (the Karlsruhe Crucifixion) has the curious effect of looking back to the Gothic artists and forward to the Baroque masters at the same time. It is an uncomfortable but deeply moving work in which cruelty, ecstasy, horror, and compassion

meet on an intense level. Everything that is most repellent and most admirable in German art is summed up in it.' E. Newton, European Painting and Sculpture. 1962 (1941), p.184.

94. Simone de Beauvoir, op. cit., p.26, p.38.

95. M. Milner, op. cit.

96. M. Milner, 'La-bas: l'écriture dans le roman', RSH, 170-71, 1978, p.19.

97. Hence too Durtal's fascination with the sin of 'Pygmalionism' -- the artist committing incest with a creature of his imagination (II,34). Similar reflections are found in 'Le Carnet vert', p.28.

98. Quoted in L. Deffoux and E. Zavis, Le Groupe de Médan. 1920, p.265.

99. The expression 'Et puis... et puis...' (I,176) becomes something of a tic. Compare 'Il continuait à tourner sur lui-même, sans avancer d'un pas' (I,166); 'au fond, il ne savait même plus, à force de s'être rabâché cette histoire, s'il aimait mieux sa chimère même amoindrie ou cette Hyacinthe qui n'amènerait du moins pas, dans la réalité, la désillusion...' (I,173).

100. See note 64 above, for example.

101. G. Boucher, Une séance de spiritisme chez J.-K. Huysmans, n.d.

102. See J. Huret, op. cit. Huysmans apparently told Myriam Harry his room was swarming with 'diablotins' (see Trois ombres, 1932, p.32).

103. Compare La-bas. II,127, II,217.

104. Huysmans raises this problem of the demarcation between 'la grande névrose' and satanism once again in his preface to Jules Bois's Le Satanisme et la magie. 1895. If one looks at a work like Charcot and Richer's Les Démoniaques dans l'art (1887), one does find that Huysmans' criticisms are to a great extent justified: the stages of a hysterical attack are described in detail, but little or no attempt is made to explain the causes. See also Ilza Veith, Hysteria: the History of a Disease. Chicago/London, 1965.

Ultimately, however, one feels that the scientific and religious attitudes are just not compatible: as Mary Anita Ever says, 'if the mystic's experience of his relationship to the Deity is pathological in toto, where can the line be drawn by which any religious experience can be considered wholesome?' A Survey of Mystical Symbolism. London/New York, 1933, p.202.

Huysmans in fact attempted to obtain a consultation with Charcot for Anna Meunier, but saw Dr Pierre Marie instead. (Lettres à Prins, 21 June 1889, p.168.)

105. 'Il est à la fois rationaliste et mystique parce qu'il voudrait tout comprendre et plus particulièrement l'inconnaissable.' H.-M. Gallot, op. cit., p.51.

106. C. Maurras, La Revue encyclopédique. 1 April 1895.

107. 'Cette vision du Moyen-Age, tel qu'il nous apparaît, à travers les pages de La-bas, sent un peu l'imagerie d'Épinal, avec ses vifs contrastes de couleurs et ses oppositions sans nuances. Mais ce pourrait bien être ce qui, à l'origine, séduit Huysmans; il éprouve à cette époque un vif désir de styliser, car l'expérience lui a prouvé qu'une analyse trop subtile, en jetant sur chaque détail une implacable lumière, laisse, en même temps que les qualités, voir les défauts, et déçoit.' P. Cogny, J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité. 1953, p.136.

108. And perhaps not so very different from the evocation of the spirit of the time at the beginning of J. Huizinga's The Waning of the Middle Ages. 1976 (1924).

109. In BSH, 69, 1978.

110. Ibid., p.39, p.41.

111. T. Todorov, Introduction à la littérature fantastique, 1970, p.29, p.36.

112. Each chapter of La-bas generally covers one day, and the episodes dealing with Gilles de Rais, Mme Chantelouve, and Carhaix alternate. Chapters thirteen to seventeen inclusive, for example, recount five successive days.

113. Thus we see Durtal lighting a cigarette and throwing coke on the fire in chapter one. Compare I,75; I,124; I,134; I,140; I,219; II,65; II,75; II,78.

114. Compare 'Le Carnet vert', p.122: 'un homme travaillant sur le moyen-âge - ami du sonneur - vivant là haut - dominant l'ordure à 100 lieues -en l'air - '.

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

The quotation by Ernest Hello is from 'Du genre fantastique', Revue française, November 1858. The quotation by Huysmans is taken from Robert Baldick, La Vie de J.-K. Huysmans, 1958, p.312.

1. P. Cogny, J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité, 1953.
R. Baldick, op. cit.

M.M. Belval, Des ténèbres à la lumière: étapes de la pensée mystique de J.-K. Huysmans, 1968.

H. Bachelin, J.-K. Huysmans: du naturalisme littéraire au naturalisme mystique, 1926.

2. En route sold in six weeks as many copies as La-bas in three years (10,000 copies); La Cathédrale sold in a month what En route sold in three years. See Lettres inédites à Arif Prins, Geneva, 1977 (letters of 1 April 1895 and 28 February 1898).

Six out of the seven large books of press cuttings kept in the Fonds Lambert of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal are devoted to Huysmans' Catholic works, an indication of their relative celebrity.

3. J. Roach, 'The Themes and Techniques in the Pre-conversion Novels of J.-K. Huysmans', Ph.D. thesis, University of Keele, 1970, p.90.

4. Myriam Harry, Trois ombres, 1932, p.43.

5. See M. Issacharoff, J.-K. Huysmans devant la critique en France, 1970 and H. Talvart and J. Place, Bibliographie des auteurs modernes de langue française, vol. IX, 1949.

6. Elizabeth M. Fraser, Le Renouveau religieux d'après le roman français de 1886 à 1914, 1934, p.135.

7. L. Bron, J.-K. Huysmans d'après des documents inédits, n.d., pp.26-27.

8. According to Françoise Gaillard, 'la foi... permet de retrouver non seulement une raison aux choses, mais aussi une forme d'élection pour soi, une surnature.' 'De l'antiphysis à la pseudophysis (l'exemple d'A rebours)', Romantisme, 30, 1980, p.82.

9. Marie-Louise Issaurat-Deslaef, 'La-bas: logique et signification du fantastique', BSH, 69, 1978.

10. Zola dislikes the word 'roman': 'ce mot entraîne une idée de conte, d'affabulation, de fantaisie, qui jure singulièrement avec les procès-verbaux que nous dressons' ('Du roman', Le Roman expérimental, X, 1297).

While Edmond de Goncourt remarked to Jules Huret: 'le roman est un genre usé, éculé, qui a dit tout ce qu'il avait à dire, un genre dont j'ai tout fait pour tuer le romanesque, pour en faire des sortes d'autobiographies, de mémoires de gens qui n'ont pas d'histoire.' Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire, 1891, p.168.

11. See Lettres à Prins, 25 May 1893.

12. Lettres inédites à Émile Zola. Geneva/Lille, 1953, p.144.
13. J.F. Franchet, 'La-haut, le refus ou la rature', in Mélanges Pierre Lambert consacrés à J.-K. Huysmans. 1975, p.180.
14. R. Baldick, op. cit., p.365.
15. For example, an anonymous British reviewer of The Cathedral in Literature, 26 March 1898: 'The Cathedral is utterly devoid of incident and movement, more opposed to the general laws of fiction than even En Route. It is, indeed, a treatise, pure and simple, set forth in the form of a long and disjointed monologue, with here and there a few words from one of the bystanders -- the two priests and an old servant. (...) All this is interesting and instructive, but why M. Huysmans should have put himself to the trouble of cloaking his philosophy and his history in the garb of fiction we fail to understand.'
16. Letter of 26 May 1897. Quoted in J. Daoust, Les Débuts bénédictins de J.-K. Huysmans. Abbaye de Saint-Wandrille, 1950, pp.120-21.
17. 14 October 1896. Ibid., pp.114-15.
18. 13 April 1898, Fonds Lambert 45.
19. Letter to Esquirol, late October 1901: 'J'ai commencé L'Oblat, mais ça va être durissime à mettre en place, la liturgie, et pas bien joyeux pour le lecteur, j'en ai peur. Enfin, je lui resservirai sa Madame Bavoil pour un brin l'égayer.' Quoted in A. Billy, Huysmans et cie. 1963, p.181.
20. R. Bessède, La Crise de la conscience catholique dans la littérature et la pensée françaises à la fin du XIXe siècle. 1975, p.400.
21. Huysmans, quoted by L. Descaves, En route. II, 317.
22. Quoted in J. Daoust, op. cit., p.71, p.85.
23. Ibid., p.85.
24. Ibid., p.71. Cf. letter to Prins of 8 March 1896.
25. According to James Laver: 'There can be little doubt that in this account of Durtal's confession and absolution we have an authentic fragment of Huysmans' autobiography. This is what makes it so moving.' The First Decadent. 1954, p.173.
26. Abbé A. Mugnier, J.-K. Huysmans à la Trappe. 1927, p.11.
27. After La-bas. 'ce n'était plus Huysmans qui créait Durtal, mais Durtal qui menait Huysmans.' P. Cogny and A. Artinian, 'La-Haut, ou la genèse d'En Route', in La-haut. Casterman, Tournai, 1965, p.16.
28. 'La-Haut, beaucoup plus nettement qu'En Route, marque cette sorte de recul apeuré devant la Grâce, ce refus de l'être devant un inconnu qui lui fait peur autant qu'il le tente...' Ibid., p.36.

29. Quoted by Edmond de Goncourt, Journal, 7 March 1895, XXI,22.

30. 'La maladie, la lente maladie qui éteignait presque doucement la vie de madame Gervaisais, la phtisie, aidait singulièrement le mysticisme, l'extatisme, l'aspiration de ce corps, devenant un esprit, vers le surnaturel de la spiritualité.

L'amaigrissement de l'étisie, la diminution et la consommation du muscle, la mort commençante et graduelle de la chair sous le ravage caverneux du mal, la dématérialisation croissante de l'être physique l'enlevaient toujours un peu plus vers les folies saintes et les délices hallucinées de l'amour religieux.'

Madame Gervaisais. Fasquelle/Flammarion, n.d., p.236.

31. E. Drougard, however, sees the conversion not as a reintegration, but as a detachment from matter. 'C'est la recherche et le goût de l'artificiel, auxquels Des Esseintes se trouve amené par sa déchéance physique et qui est déjà un détachement de la matière, du "réel" humain, à un premier degré. Ce détachement de la matière, renforcé par le réveil religieux concomitant (inconscient d'abord, mais progressif) aboutira naturellement à la conversion catholique et à la vie mystique.' 'Du nouveau sur A Rebours', BSH, 7, 1932, pp.229-30.

32. For example, En route, I,71; I,142; I,159; I,275.

33. An alternative solution is the temptation of stasis proposed by the diabolic voice in En route: 'la vraie bonté, elle eût consisté à ne rien inventer, à ne rien créer, à laisser tout en l'état, dans le néant, en paix!' (II,186). Cf. the lunar voyage in En route.

34. Cf. the imagery of the landscape of the soul, En route, II,191.

35. 'Ce volume m'a crevé et il me dégoûte, car je n'ai pu parvenir à faire ce qu'il fallait. C'est pâle et gnoille. Mais comment rendre des sensations qu'on ne peut démêler, des sensations inexprimables?' Huysmans to A. Lauzet, 4 January 1895, Fonds Lambert 49.

36. 'Seulement, il faut avoir ressenti cela, par soi-même, pour y croire!' (En route, II,202).

37. Bachelin, who in fact is sympathetic to Huysmans, points out 'cette savoureuse contradiction fondamentale qu'on relève entre la spiritualité, qui voudrait s'épurer, de ses desirs d'une vie allégée de tous besoins physiques et charnels, et la matérialité persistante des descriptions qu'il en fait.' Op. cit.,p.156.

38. 'En route est à mon sens un livre qui échappe au jugement littéraire. C'est avant tout un guide, au sens le plus utilitaire du mot: un guide indispensable pour le néophyte hésitant au bord du royaume de la joie.' François Mauriac, preface to En route, Imprimerie Nationale, 1954, p.25.

See also H.R.T. Brandreth, Huysmans, 1963.

39. George Orwell, however, wonders: 'How many Roman Catholics have been good novelists? Even the handful one could name have usually been bad Catholics. The novel is practically a Protestant form of art; it is a product of the free mind, of the autonomous individual.' 'Inside the Whale', Selected Essays. (Penguin) 1957, p.39.

40. 'Rien, sinon la lecture même du paquet, ne pourrait montrer l'incomparable sottise des conversations entre Durtal et ses deux abbés dont l'abbé Plomb, l'ineffable abbé Plomb, entretiens d'un ennui à tuer les mouches, où chacun apporte son petit carnet de notes archéologiques, hagiographiques, liturgiques ou exégétiques, avec toutes les références; où les plus savants bouquins et, autant que possible, les plus inconnus, ont été mis à contribution par ces trois bavards qui dégorgeaient leurs lectures, pendant des heures, sans jamais obtenir la grâce d'un aperçu, d'un pâle trait de lumière, d'un semblant de conclusion sur quoi que ce soit.'

Léon Bloy on La Cathédrale in 'Les Dernières Colonnes de l'Eglise', Oeuvres, 1965, IV, 257.

In La Femme pauvre Huysmans appears as 'Folantin': 'Léopold n'était pas de l'école des Rares qui découvrent tout à coup le catholicisme dans un vitrail ou dans un neume de plain-chant, et qui vont, comme Folantin, se 'documenter' à la Trappe sur l'esthétique de la prière et le galbe du renoncement. Il ne disait pas, à l'instar de cet imbécile, qu'un service funèbre a plus de grandeur qu'une messe nuptiale, persuadé, jusqu'au plus intime de sa raison, que toutes les formes de la Liturgie sont également saintes et redoutables. Il ne pensait pas non plus qu'une architecture spéciale fût indispensable aux élans de la dévotion et ne songeait pas, une minute, à se demander s'il était sous un plein cintre ou sous un tiers-point, quand il s'agenouillait devant un autel.'

Oeuvres, 1972, VII, 198. The examples are from En route.

41. Conor Cruise O'Brien (as D. O'Donnell), Maria Cross, 1954. Henriette Psichari, Les Convertis de la Belle Epoque, 1971, p.40.

42. La Femme pauvre, p.42.

43. 'Tout homme qui produit un acte libre projette sa personnalité dans l'infini. S'il donne de mauvais coeur un sou à un pauvre, ce sou perce la main du pauvre, tombe, perce la terre, troue les soleils, traverse le firmament et compromet l'univers.'

Le Désespéré, Oeuvres, 1964, III, 113. The opening paragraph of chapter XLV (pp.173-74) provides another striking example.

44. For instance, Durtal's grumbles about his housekeeper in the first chapter of L'Oblat.

45. Quoted by Henri Mitterand in Lourdes, VII, 478.

46. Lourdes, VII, 391.

47. Le Désespéré, p.137.

48. R.M. Griffiths, The Reactionary Revolution, 1966. Joyce O. Lowrie, The Violent Mystique: thematics of retribution and expiation in Balzac, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Bloy, and Huysmans, Geneva, 1974.

49. 'L'horreur de la chair place le crucifix -- une charogne clouée sur deux poutres -- au centre du culte catholique, de préférence à tout autre symbole chrétien, le Christ rayonnant de la Transfiguration par exemple. Elle se détourne résolument du dogme de la résurrection de la chair, et veut ignorer que Jésus chaque fois qu'il rencontre le sexe -- même sous la forme anti-sociale de la prostitution ou de l'adultère -- prend sa défense contre la colère des pharisiens.'

Michel Tournier, Le Vent Paraclet, 1977, p.62.

50. J.O. Lowrie, op. cit., p.142.
51. Ibid., p.71.
52. Ibid., p.65. Cf. M. Rudwin, Les Écrivains diaboliques de France, 1937, p.78: 'Au lieu du démon objectif, Barbey nous décrit, surtout dans ses Diaboliques (1874), des manifestations subjectives de maladies psychiques revêtant les formes d'une démonialité ou d'une démonophobie.'
53. R. M. Griffiths, op. cit., pp.98-99.
54. B.Sarrazin, 'Sang, feu ou quoi? La crise de l'idée sacrificielle dans l'oeuvre de Léon Bloy', Romantisme, 31, 1981, p.39.
55. H. Juin, Écrivains de l'avant-siècle, 1972, p.141.
56. R. Doumic, 'Les Décadents du christianisme', Revue des deux mondes, 15 March 1895, p.468. For Pie Duployé, Durtal remains 'un décadent chrétien, un bibelotier du culte' (Huysmans, 1968, p.52).
57. According to Mary Anita Ewer, mystics feel the 'ultimate sanctity and divine significance of all objects'. A Survey of Mystical Symbolism, London/New York, 1933, p.103.
58. Lourdes, VII,17-18, 35.
59. Ibid., VII,380.
60. R. de Gourmont, 'Une religion d'art', La Culture des idées, 1916, 12th ed., p.136.
61. M. Thomas, 'Un aventurier de la mystique: l'abbé Boullan', CTSJ, 8, 1963, pp.120-21.
62. Ibid., p.120, p.129. H. Juin, op. cit., p.141.
63. La Femme pauvre, p.192. Bloy apparently believed himself to be a 'parricide' because he calculated that his father had died at the very hour he was making love to Anne-Marie Roulé. See Conor Cruise O'Brien, op. cit., p.209.
64. 'Pour nous décrire ce rigoureux dénuement et cette prodigieuse magnificence, Huysmans a recours à toute la magie de son style. Les sanies brillent comme du quartz, les ulcères flairent la cannelle et nous ne savons plus si les larmes gelées ne sont pas de brillantes stalactites et les plaies de précieux rubis.'
Christiane Aimery, J.-K. Huysmans, 1944, p.21.
65. Sainte Lydwine, I,82.
66. Mysticism is 'cette science qui a ses lois, qui peut annoncer d'avance la plupart des phénomènes produits dans une âme lorsque Dieu la manipule et qui suit aussi nettement les opérations spirituelles que la physiologie observe les états différents des corps.' Huysmans to Jules Huret, 1 January 1895, Fonds Lambert 49.
67. Huysmans appears at one point to suggest that all illness is a form of expiation (Sainte Lydwine, II,125).

68. R.M. Griffiths, op. cit., p.175.

69. Butler's Lives of the Saints notes 'the extravagances and inaccuracies of Huysmans' Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam which has gone through so many editions.' For instance that 'Although she is quite commonly called Saint Lydwine, she has never been officially canonised, but her cultus was formally confirmed by Pope Leo XIII in 1890.' (Revised ed., 1953, vol. 2, p.98.)

70. M.M. Belval, op. cit., pp.68-69.

71. Quoted by R.M. Griffiths, op. cit., p.68 n.39.

Bloy had already noted in his review of A rebours: 'Le catholicisme ne suffit pas à cet enragé, parce que la présence eucharistique réelle n'est pas assez, il lui faut la présence SENSIBLE, quoiqu'il ne le dise pas et quoique, peut-être, il l'ignore.' 'Les Représailles du Sphinx', Le Chat noir, 14 June 1884.

72. Quoted by R.M. Griffiths, op. cit., p.65.

73. E. Mâle, L'Art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France. (Livres de poche) 1968 (1898), vol. 2, p.243.

74. Jacques de Voragine, La Légende dorée, translated J.-B.M. Roze, introduction by the R.P. H. Savon, 2 vols., Garnier-Flammarion, 1967.

75. Ibid., I,9.

76. Ibid., I,10.

77. Ibid., I,13-14.

78. Ibid., I,12.

79. Ibid., I,11.

80. Letter of 30 December 1900, Fonds Lambert 45.

81. Helen Trudgian's abridged edition of La Cathédrale (Nelson, 1936) omits both these episodes, thus showing the prudishness which Huysmans actually denounces in the book (and which he considered to be typically English!).

82. J.-L. Steinmetz, 'Sang sens', RSH, 170-71, 1978, p.83.

83. J. Webb, The Flight from Reason, 1971, p.87.

84. See R. Baldick, op. cit., pp.398-99.

François Mauriac remarks: 'il a vécu dans sa chair, en quelques mois, ce qu'il avait chanté avec délectation durant quelques années: la passion de son Seigneur et de son Dieu' (op. cit., p.25).

85. Micheline Tison-Braun, La Crise de l'humanisme, 1958, vol. 1, pp.114-15.

86. Les Foules de Lourdes, pp.93-94. A central episode in Zola's Lourdes is the supposedly miraculous cure of the paralysed girl Marie de Guersaint. Zola makes it clear that her paralysis is hysterical in origin.

87. For example in La-bas. I, 175.

88. Marina Warner, Alone of all her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary. 1976, p.310.

89. E. Hello, op. cit., p.35. Hello is praised in both A rebours and La-bas.

90. A. Breton, preface to P. Mabille, Le Miroir du merveilleux. 1962, p.16.

91. E. Hello, op. cit., p.32; A. Breton, op. cit., pp.11-12.

92. '...aujourd'hui, on ne peut plus croire à une réalité immuable, externe, ni à une littérature qui ne serait que la transcription de cette réalité. Les mots ont gagné une autonomie que les choses ont perdue.' E. Todorov, Introduction à la littérature fantastique. 1970, pp.176-77. Cf. p.14.

93. Ibid., pp.146-47.

94. Ibid., p.87.

95. 'Sa constante préoccupation sera de rendre matérielles, palpables, d'entraîner à la fange les choses les plus pures, les plus éthérées, et de plonger tout idéal dans la matière. C'est le Christ mourant comme un chien; c'est sainte Agnès au lupanar; c'est l'extase des bons religieux décrite comme l'état de catalepsie des satanistes; c'est le frère Siméon, si saint, qu'il met dans la compagnie des pourceaux, l'ange dans la bête et la bête à l'écurie.' Abbé F. Belleville, La Conversion de M. Huysmans. Bourges, n.d. (1898), p.165.

96. E. Hello, op. cit., p.35.

97. B. Sarrazin, 'A propos de quelques pages de Bachelard. Pierres et pierreries: l'expérience symbolique de J.-K. Huysmans', RSH, 133, 1969, p.106.

98. Ibid., p.109.

99. P. Claudel, Oeuvres en prose, (Pléiade) 1965, p.349.

100. Quoted in Fernande Zayed, Huysmans peintre de son époque. 1973, p.157.

101. 'La symbolique, qui est la science d'employer une figure ou une image comme signe d'une autre chose, a été la grande idée du moyen âge, et, sans elle, rien de ces époques lointaines ne s'explique. Sachant très bien qu'ici-bas tout est figure, que les êtres et que les objets visibles sont, suivant l'expression de Saint Denys l'Aréopagite, les images lumineuses des invisibles, l'art du moyen âge s'assigna le but d'exprimer des sentiments et des pensées avec les formes matérielles, variées, de la vitre et de la pierre et il créa un alphabet à son usage.' Huysmans, Trois églises. OC XI, 170.

87. For example in La-bas. I, 175.

88. Marina Warner, Alone of all her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary. 1976, p.310.

89. E. Hello, op. cit., p.35. Hello is praised in both A rebours and La-bas.

90. A. Breton, preface to P. Mabilly, Le Miroir du merveilleux, 1962, p.16.

91. E. Hello, op. cit., p.32; A. Breton, op. cit., pp.11-12.

92. '...aujourd'hui, on ne peut plus croire à une réalité immuable, externe, ni à une littérature qui ne serait que la transcription de cette réalité. Les mots ont gagné une autonomie que les choses ont perdue.' T. Todorov, Introduction à la littérature fantastique. 1970, pp.176-77. Cf. p.14.

93. Ibid., pp.146-47.

94. Ibid., p.87.

95. 'Sa constante préoccupation sera de rendre matérielles, palpables, d'entraîner à la fange les choses les plus pures, les plus éthérées, et de plonger tout idéal dans la matière. C'est le Christ mourant comme un chien; c'est sainte Agnès au lupanar; c'est l'extase des bons religieux décrite comme l'état de catalepsie des satanistes; c'est le frère Simeon, si saint, qu'il met dans la compagnie des pourceaux, l'ange dans la bête et la bête à l'écurie.' Abbé F. Belleville, La Conversion de M. Huysmans, Bourges, n.d. (1898), p.165.

96. E. Hello, op. cit., p.35.

97. B. Sarrazin, 'A propos de quelques pages de Bachelard. Pierres et pierreries: l'expérience symbolique de J.-K. Huysmans', RSH. 133, 1969, p.106.

98. Ibid., p.109.

99. P. Claudel, Oeuvres en prose, (Pléiade) 1965, p.349.

100. Quoted in Fernande Zayed, Huysmans peintre de son époque. 1973, p.157.

101. 'La symbolique, qui est la science d'employer une figure ou une image comme signe d'une autre chose, a été la grande idée du moyen âge, et, sans elle, rien de ces époques lointaines ne s'explique. Sachant très bien qu'ici-bas tout est figure, que les êtres et que les objets visibles sont, suivant l'expression de Saint Denys l'Aréopagite, les images lumineuses des invisibles, l'art du moyen âge s'assigna le but d'exprimer des sentiments et des pensées avec les formes matérielles, variées, de la vitre et de la pierre et il créa un alphabet à son usage.' Huysmans, Trois églises, OC XI, 170.

102. E. Mâle, op. cit., I, 79.

103. 'En publiant La Cathédrale en 1898, Huysmans n'a pas songé un instant à présenter au public un roman. (...) Les personnages sont peu nombreux et ne paraissent guère qu'en qualité de figurants, pour exposer les vues et les systèmes de l'auteur.'

G. Veyssset, Huysmans et la médecine. 1950, p.97.

104. B. Nelson, 'Lukács, Zola and the Aesthetics of Realism', Studi Francesi. 71, 1980, p.254.

105. Huysmans' manner has been parodied by A. Kies, who imagines Durtal probing the symbolism of sardines: 'Alors, pour édulcorer d'ultimes noises, Durtal songea un instant aux sardines. Il lut l'Ichtyophagie de Conrad de Spanheim, doux moine allemand du IXème siècle, le De Sardinis de Benoît d'Hulskamp, la Piscicultura sacra de Molanus, la Symbolique des Sardines de Dom Gaston Clément...' (BSH, 32, 1956, p.31).

106. M. Tison—Braun, op. cit., p.130.

107. Ibid., pp.511-12.

108. See R. Baldick, op. cit., p.269, p.307.

109. Abbé F. Belleville, op. cit. Abbé G. Périès, La Littérature religieuse de M. Huysmans. 1898.

110. La Femme pauvre. p.159. Cf. note 40 above.

111. Noting that little attention had been paid to Huysmans' post-conversion works at the Le Mans colloquium in 1977, Max Milner asks: 'En Route marquerait-il le départ vers un ailleurs de la littérature, ou de ce que nos contemporains ressentent comme tel?' (RSH, 170-71, 1978).

112. Simone de Beauvoir argues that 'pour se plaire à humilier la chair, à l'exalter, il fallait la valoriser; elle n'a plus ni sens ni prix si on peut en toute tranquillité traiter les hommes en choses.' Faut-il brûler Sade?. 1972 (1955), p.26.

113. '...le cadre d'une synthèse lui fit défaut. (...) Faute d'un principe d'unification, Huysmans livre ses talents et ses dons à l'anarchie, incoordonnés.' R. Amadou, 'Huysmans et la symbolique', CTSJ. 8, 1963, pp.252-53.

114. Cf. B. Sarrazin, 'A propos de quelques pages de Bachelard...', p.98.

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

1. M.Y. Ortoleva, Joris-Karl Huysmans romancier du salut, Sherbrooke, 1981.
2. See P. Valéry, 'Souvenir de J.-K. Huysmans', in Oeuvres, I, (Gallimard, Pléiade) 1957.
3. 'Organiquement, chaque cogitation du cerveau, vive et prolongée, produit des vibrations nerveuses qui donnent lieu à des émissions fluidiques. (...) le remords est un fait physique, et rien au monde, la magie même, ne peut arracher le meurtrier au fantôme de sa victime, le vicieux à l'obsession de son vice.' J. Péladan, Le Vice suprême, 1979, pp.91-92.
4. See V. Cherbuliez, Le Comte Kostia, 1863, p.15, p.39.
5. M. Girard has observed that Zola's art could well be called a 'Symbolisme matérialiste'. 'Naturalisme et Symbolisme', Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises, 6, 1954, p.106.
6. 'Le Carnet vert', Fonds Lambert 75, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.
7. 'L'artifice n'est pas sa propre fin et dissimule un besoin d'idéal. Dans la claustration de des Esseintes s'opère, non seulement une médiation comme le jeu des synesthésies baudelairiennes, mais aussi une recherche d'élévation et de transcendance.' Marie-Claire Richard, 'Le Thème de la claustration dans A Rebours de J.-K. Huysmans', Recherches sur l'imaginaire, 6, Université d'Angers, 1980, p.61.
8. Quoted from Mallarmé, introduced and translated by A. Hartley, (Penguin) 1965, p.xix.
9. 'Chez Huysmans, cette opposition de la chair et de l'esprit ne recèle aucunement une attitude d'emprunt ou la volonté d'exploiter littérairement un motif dramatique. Le romancier vécut cette contradiction. Le drame intime de cette lutte interminable et atroce le ravagea et faillit le détruire.' Florence de Lussy, 'Valéry et Huysmans', in Colloque Paul Valéry, ed. C.P. Barbier, 1978, p.295.
10. M.-C. Bancquart, Images littéraires du Paris 'fin-de-siècle', 1979, p.158.
11. See M. Tournier, Des clés et des serrures, 1979.

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